

The background of the cover is a photograph of a family—a man, a woman, and two children—walking away from the viewer on a dirt path. They are walking towards a small town with a church, which is situated on a hillside. In the distance, a large city skyline is visible across a river. The scene is set during sunset, with the sun low on the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow over the entire landscape. The sky is filled with soft, colorful clouds.

The
KINGDOM
of **GOD:**
From Covenant to Civilization

*How an Ancient Vision of Divine Rule
Became a Question for the Modern World*

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Part I

The Covenantal Kingdom: How Jesus Understood the Reign of God

Introduction

The Question Behind the Kingdom

According to the earliest Gospel tradition, Jesus opened his public ministry with a simple proclamation: *"The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has drawn near. Repent, and believe the good news."*

Few subjects have generated more sustained debate in historical Jesus research than the meaning of this announcement. The Kingdom of God stands at the center of Jesus' public proclamation, shapes his parables, frames his ethical teaching, and provides the unifying theme of the Synoptic Gospels. Yet despite more than a century of scholarship, no single interpretation has achieved lasting consensus. Some scholars understand the Kingdom primarily as a future apocalyptic intervention through which God will decisively transform history. Others argue that Jesus proclaimed a Kingdom already present in his ministry and embodied in the lives of his followers. Still others interpret it as a social, political, or ethical vision that challenged existing structures of power, while some understand it more inwardly, as a spiritual reality experienced within the individual through transformation or awareness of the divine presence. Each approach illuminates part of the evidence, yet the larger historical question remains unresolved.

Perhaps the difficulty begins one step earlier. Before determining when the Kingdom comes or how it manifests itself, we must first ask what the expression "Kingdom of God" means as a conception of rule. What kind of kingship does it envision, what order does such kingship imply, and from what earlier Israelite understanding of divine authority did it emerge.

To answer that question, we must first establish how Jesus' Kingdom language actually functions across the Gospel traditions. Only then can we turn to the historical traditions that preceded him and ask how they may have shaped the conception of divine rule that his proclamation assumes.

Before we examine the different expressions of the Kingdom, however, one word in Jesus' opening proclamation requires particular attention: “repent.” The command is not incidental. It is the response Jesus places immediately alongside the announcement that the Kingdom of God has drawn near. If repentance describes what human beings are being asked to do in response to God's approaching reign, then understanding what Jesus means by “repent” is essential to understanding the Kingdom itself.

The Meaning of Repentance

The word “repent” in Jesus' opening proclamation deserves attention because its meaning can easily be narrowed by modern usage. The Greek verb translated “repent,” *metanoēō*, refers fundamentally to a change of mind, orientation, or course. It can certainly involve turning away from wrongdoing, but repentance should not be reduced simply to feeling guilty about past behavior or abandoning a list of personal failings. In the context of Jesus' proclamation, the reason for repentance is stated first: the Kingdom of God has drawn near.

Repentance therefore represents a response to the announcement of God's reign. If the Kingdom means that God's sovereignty is becoming effective within human history, then repentance means reorienting one's life in response to that claim. It involves turning away from ways of living that contradict the order associated with God's sovereignty and turning toward a life ordered under that sovereignty. The emphasis is not merely on what a person feels about the past, but on the direction in which that person now chooses to live.

Within the covenantal world Jesus inherited, that reorientation was never exclusively private. Allegiance to God carried obligations toward other human beings. To turn toward God therefore had consequences for how one treated the neighbor: whether one exploited or cared for the vulnerable, sought vengeance or reconciliation, pursued personal advantage or accepted responsibility for others. Repentance can therefore be understood as having both a vertical and a horizontal dimension: a renewed allegiance to God and a corresponding reorientation of one's relationships with other people.

This does not mean that *metanoēō* itself literally means “love your neighbor,” nor does it turn repentance into a complete definition of the Kingdom. Rather, the covenantal context helps explain what a changed orientation could mean within Jesus' historical world. The announcement of God's reign calls human beings not simply to believe that something is happening, but to change the direction of their lives in response to it.

The Four Expressions of the Kingdom

The Gospel traditions do not preserve the Kingdom of God in a single formula. Jesus speaks of the Kingdom as *near*, *present*, becoming *visible through action*, and yet *still to be fully realized*.

These expressions occur in different contexts and should not simply be collapsed into one another. Taken together, however, they suggest that the Kingdom was not understood merely as a place or as a single event located at one point in time. It could be announced as approaching, encountered in the present, recognized through what was happening, and anticipated as a reality yet to be fully realized.

1. The Kingdom is near

The first and most prominent formulation appears at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Mark reports that Jesus announced: "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (*Mark 1:15*). Matthew similarly preserves the proclamation in abbreviated form: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (*Matthew 4:17*).

The announcement therefore carries an unmistakable sense of urgency: the expected reign of God is no longer simply a matter of distant anticipation but demands a response in the present. That response is expressed first in the command to repent and believe. The Kingdom is therefore announced not only as something God is bringing about, but as a reality that calls for a corresponding change in human life. What repentance entails within Jesus' covenantal and prophetic world becomes an important question for understanding how the Kingdom is expected to take shape among those who respond to it.

2. The Kingdom is present

Other sayings introduce a present dimension that complicates a purely future interpretation. When asked when the Kingdom of God would come, Jesus responds that it does not arrive in a manner that can simply be identified as a visible political event. Luke's formulation, traditionally translated as "the Kingdom of God is within you" or "in your midst," is linguistically debated, since the Greek *entos* can support either sense depending upon context: "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed... For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst" (*Luke 17:20–21*).

The traditional translation, "within you," has therefore generated an important line of interpretation in which the Kingdom is understood as something that takes place within the human person: divine rule is encountered inwardly, as an interior transformation or as the presence of the divine within human life. Other interpretations understand Jesus to be saying that the Kingdom is "in your midst," meaning that God's reign is already present among the people standing before him. The difference is significant. The first emphasizes an interior dimension of divine presence; the second emphasizes the Kingdom's presence in the community or in Jesus' own activity. Neither interpretation should simply be dismissed, but neither should be treated as settled by the English translation alone.

Whatever precise translation is preferred, the saying directs attention toward a Kingdom that can already be encountered rather than merely awaited. The Kingdom is therefore not presented solely as a future political transformation imposed from outside. At least within this saying, its reality is capable of being present in human experience, in relationship, and in the activity through which God's rule becomes recognizable. This present dimension will become important when we examine how Jesus connects the Kingdom with repentance, healing, forgiveness, love, and the transformation of human relationships.

3. The Kingdom becomes visible through action

The Kingdom is likewise described as becoming visible through action. In one of Jesus' sayings, "If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (*Luke 11:20; cf. Matthew 12:28*), the restoration of people afflicted by forces understood in his time as supernatural is presented as evidence that God's reign is already breaking into the present.

The point is significant for understanding Jesus' proclamation: the Kingdom is not portrayed solely as a future event. It is also described as something becoming visible through the restoration and transformation of human life.

4. The Kingdom remains to be fully realized

Yet the Gospel traditions also preserve a future dimension. The Kingdom can be entered, received, or inherited, and Jesus speaks of a coming manifestation of the Kingdom that lies beyond the immediate present: "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power" (*Mark 9:1*).

The Kingdom therefore remains both something encountered and something still to be fully realized.

These formulations need not be treated as competing definitions. They may instead represent different dimensions of the same conception. The Kingdom is *near* because God's reign is being announced as imminent; it is *present* because its reality can already be encountered; it becomes *visible through action* when that authority is manifested; and it remains future because its complete realization *has not yet occurred*.

The Covenantal Roots of the Kingdom

This raises a more fundamental question for the present study. If the Kingdom can be present before it is fully consummated, what makes it recognizable in human life? What does a person or community actually do that expresses the order Jesus associates with God's reign?

The question cannot be answered simply by equating the Kingdom with a particular ethical principle. The Hebrew Scriptures, however, provide a framework for considering what life under God's rule is expected to look like. Biblical portrayals of divine and righteous kingship repeatedly associate God's rule with justice, righteousness, peace, restoration, and the protection of those who are vulnerable. The Sinai covenant provides a corresponding pattern for human life under that sovereignty: allegiance to God expressed through loyalty and obedience, and responsibility toward one's neighbor expressed through justice, mercy, and love. Deuteronomy commands Israel to love the LORD with all its heart, soul, and strength, while Leviticus commands the people to love their neighbor as themselves.

When Jesus is questioned in Jerusalem by a Pharisee described as an expert in the law, he is asked which commandment is greatest. He answers first with the command from Deuteronomy (6:4–5): "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." He then immediately adds the command from Leviticus (19:18): "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." He concludes, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (*Matthew 22:35–40*; cf. *Mark 12:28–31*).

Jesus therefore does not invent the two obligations as a new ethical system. He identifies two commands already present within Israel's covenantal tradition and places them together as a concise expression of the larger moral demands of the Law.

The question, then, is whether this covenantal moral framework helps explain what Jesus means when he proclaims the Kingdom of God. If God's reign represents the effective realization of divine sovereignty, and if covenantal faithfulness describes how human beings are to live under that sovereignty, then love of God and love of neighbor may provide an important indication of what life under the Kingdom looks like. This is an inference from the larger scriptural pattern,

not a definition supplied by either commandment in isolation. The Gospel traditions must therefore be examined to determine whether Jesus himself presents the Kingdom in these terms.

The hypothesis advanced here is therefore not that every Kingdom saying means precisely the same thing, nor that Jesus consciously formulated a systematic theory connecting all of them. Rather, it is that the different Kingdom formulations can be read together as dimensions of a conception in which divine sovereignty is announced as *imminent*, encountered in the *present*, manifested through *action*, and ultimately *realized* in human life. The two commandments of love may therefore provide an important expression of the human response associated with this conception. The argument rests not on treating these commandments as a complete definition of the Kingdom, but on asking whether they illuminate the pattern that emerges from Jesus' teaching and actions.

The historical question is what precedes this formulation. If the Kingdom represents the realization of divine sovereignty within human history, then we must ask how Israelite traditions understood the relationship between divine rule and human obligation, justice, covenant, and communal life. This inquiry does not assume that Jesus simply reproduced an existing conception of the Kingdom. It asks instead whether the covenantal and prophetic traditions provide the historical categories through which his proclamation can be understood.

That question requires us to step outside the Gospel narratives for a moment and look at the world in which Israelite ideas about God, kingship, law, and social order developed. Ancient Israel did not exist in an intellectual vacuum. It emerged within the wider world of the ancient Near East, surrounded by civilizations that had already developed sophisticated ideas about divine authority, kingship, justice, law, temple worship, political legitimacy, and the relationship between rulers and the gods. Egypt, Mesopotamia, Canaan, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia all contributed to the cultural environment in which Israelite traditions were formed, preserved, challenged, and reinterpreted.

This wider context does not make Israelite religion derivative, nor does similarity automatically establish borrowing. Ideas can arise independently, travel through cultural contact, or be transformed so thoroughly that their earlier forms become difficult to recognize. The historical task is therefore not to decide in advance whether Israel invented its religious concepts or borrowed them from its neighbors. It is to examine the similarities, differences, historical pressures, and patterns of transmission that may help explain how Israelite thought developed.

One of the most revealing examples of this process concerns the relationship between deity, image, and sacred space. Throughout the ancient Near East, divine presence was often associated with cult images, temples, and the political institutions that surrounded them. Israelite tradition increasingly rejected the representation of YHWH through a physical image, yet it did not eliminate the need for a tangible focus of divine presence. Instead, that function became concentrated in the Temple, the priesthood, sacred objects, and the rituals surrounding them. The result was a striking tension that would remain embedded within Israelite religion: God could not be reduced to an image or literally contained within a building, yet the Temple became the privileged institutional and symbolic location of God's presence. Understanding that tension will be important when we later examine what happened to the idea of God's Kingdom when Jesus began to embody its principles outside the Temple itself.

The biblical texts present the covenant as the defining relationship between Israel and its God, while the ancient Near Eastern evidence shows that covenantal ideas developed within a much

broader world of political and religious traditions. Ancient Near Eastern societies had long possessed traditions of royal law, treaty, vassalage, divine sanction, and obligations between rulers and subjects. Hammurabi's famous Babylonian monument, for example, presents the king as a divinely sanctioned guarantor of justice, while the treaty traditions of the ancient Near East established formal obligations between powerful rulers and subordinate peoples. The Sinai traditions therefore belong within a much larger ancient conversation about sovereignty, obligation, law, and legitimate rule.

The distinctive question is not whether Israel participated in that conversation. It clearly did. The more interesting question is how Israelite writers transformed those inherited categories into a particular understanding of divine kingship and communal life.

This study argues that the Kingdom of God is best understood through that development. Rather than treating covenant and Kingdom as unrelated theological ideas that happen to intersect in Jesus' teaching, it proposes that they represent two dimensions of a larger historical conception of divine rule. **Covenant provides the framework through which Israelite tradition described the obligations of life under God's sovereignty, while Kingdom describes the realization of that sovereignty within history.**

That proposition must, however, be approached historically rather than confessionally. The biblical writers repeatedly portray Israel as a people living under the authority of a covenant established by God. Whether God actually established that covenant is a theological claim, not a proposition that historical inquiry can independently verify. Indeed, no historical method available to human inquiry can substantiate the transcendent agency of God as the cause of a historical event. History can examine the people who made such claims, the texts in which those claims were preserved, the institutions and practices that developed around them, and the changing circumstances through which the claims acquired meaning. It cannot move from those historical effects to empirical verification of the divine agency asserted behind them.

This distinction does not make the theological claim irrelevant to historical study. On the contrary, it makes the historical question more precise. Rather than attempting to prove or disprove God's action, this study asks how Israelite communities came to understand themselves through the claim that their covenant had been established by God, how that conception developed in response to changing historical circumstances, and how Jesus inherited, interpreted, and transformed that tradition.

Accordingly, this study distinguishes between the historical reconstruction of Jesus' own proclamation and the theological interpretations that developed within later Christian tradition. Its concern is not primarily with how subsequent generations understood the meaning and significance of Jesus and his proclamation, but with how Jesus himself proclaimed the Kingdom of God within the covenantal world of first-century Judaism.

The historical question, however, is only the first stage of the investigation. If the Kingdom represents the realization of divine sovereignty within human history, then its significance cannot be confined to the question of when or how God establishes his rule. It must also be examined in terms of what life under that rule requires of human beings. This is where the two commandments preserved within the covenantal tradition become especially important: the command to love God, expressed most explicitly in the *Shema* of Deuteronomy, and the command to love one's neighbor as oneself in Leviticus.

These are not merely two ethical instructions placed alongside Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom. Taken together, they provide a concise expression of the human response to the order that the Kingdom announces. Love of God establishes allegiance to the sovereign whose rule defines the covenant; love of neighbor gives that allegiance a social form by governing the relationship between human beings. The Kingdom therefore joins two dimensions that are often separated in modern interpretation: the **vertical** relationship between humanity and God and the **horizontal** relationship among human beings.

Part I traces the historical development that makes this relationship intelligible. It follows the emergence of ideas concerning divine sovereignty, the image of God, covenant, law, justice, kingship, exile, restoration, and the expectation of God's reign before returning to the proclamation of Jesus. **The purpose is not to prove a theological doctrine, but to determine whether the historical evidence supports the reconstruction of the Kingdom as the realization of a covenantal conception of divine rule.**

Part II then asks what follows if that reconstruction is correct. If the Kingdom is not simply a promise concerning the future but a conception of ordered human life under divine sovereignty, then its implications extend beyond the ancient setting in which the proclamation first appeared. The principles embedded in the covenantal tradition—human dignity, responsibility, justice, accountable authority, stewardship, and the obligation to seek the good of one's neighbor—raise questions about the kind of society human beings have and ought to build.

The movement from Kingdom to civilization is therefore not an arbitrary extension of the argument. It follows from the structure of the Kingdom itself. If divine rule is expressed through a transformed relationship between God and humanity, and if that relationship is inseparable from the obligation to love one's neighbor, then the Kingdom carries consequences for the organization of human life. Part II explores those consequences and asks whether an **ancient conception of divine rule can still provide a standard by which modern civilization may be evaluated.**

The chapters that follow therefore pursue two connected questions. First, what did Jesus mean by the Kingdom of God within the covenantal world of first-century Judaism? Second, what does that conception of divine rule imply for the organization of human life when its foundational principles are considered beyond their original historical setting? The first question guides Part One; the second carries the inquiry into Part Two, where the implications of that vision are considered in relation to civilization and the world we have built.



Chapter One

God, King, and the Ancient World

If Jesus proclaimed that the Kingdom of God had drawn near, the historian's first task is not to assume that the expression possessed a single fixed meaning from the beginning. It is to ask how ideas of divine kingship developed within the world that produced the Jewish Scriptures and the traditions inherited by Jesus. The Gospel writers give no indication that Jesus was inventing the language of God's Kingdom. His proclamation assumes that his hearers already possessed a conceptual vocabulary in which divine rule, human kingship, covenant, justice, and restoration could be discussed. To understand what Jesus meant, therefore, we must first examine the intellectual and political environment from which those ideas emerged.

The World of Gods and Kings

The ancient Near East was a world in which religion and political authority were deeply intertwined. Kings ruled territories, maintained armies, administered justice, built temples, and presented themselves as legitimate representatives of the divine order. Temples were not simply places of private worship. They were major economic, political, and religious institutions, while cult images were understood in ways very different from the modern idea of a statue. Across the ancient Near East, a divine image could serve as a material representation of a deity's presence, connecting the god to a particular temple, city, and cult.

This relationship between deity, image, temple, and political power had important consequences for how ancient peoples understood sovereignty. A kingdom was not merely a political territory; it belonged within a sacred order in which gods, rulers, cities, temples, and the land itself were connected. When kingdoms came into conflict, therefore, political victory could carry religious meaning. The defeat of a people could be interpreted as evidence that its deity had failed to

protect them, while the capture of temples or sacred objects could symbolize the transfer of power from one political and religious order to another.

Israel emerged within this world but gradually developed a distinctive conception of divine sovereignty. The Israelite tradition increasingly rejected the representation of YHWH through a physical cult image, yet it did not therefore abandon the idea of divine presence. Instead, that presence became associated with sacred space, ritual, priesthood, and ultimately the Temple. The result was a tension that would remain central to Israelite religion: YHWH could be present among Israel without being reducible to an object or contained within a building. Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple expresses the tension directly: "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built?" (1 Kings 8:27). The Temple could therefore serve as the earthly center of Israel's worship without becoming the boundary of YHWH's sovereignty.

The Babylonian world provides an especially important comparison because Babylon possessed its own highly developed understanding of divine kingship and cosmic order. In the Babylonian creation tradition preserved in the *Enuma Elish*, Marduk's rise to supremacy is connected with the defeat of Tiamat, the establishment of cosmic order, the organization of the heavens, and the granting of kingship. Creation, divine sovereignty, Babylon, and the temple of Marduk therefore belong to a single ideological system. Marduk is not simply a god who happens to have Babylon as his home; his supremacy is expressed through the cosmic order that his victory establishes and the royal order that reflects it.

The Israelite conception that emerges in Genesis presents a different relationship between deity, cosmos, and sovereignty. Genesis does not portray YHWH as one divine contender who defeats a rival god and thereby establishes his supremacy. The cosmos itself is presented as created by God. The sun, moon, and stars are not independent divine powers but created objects, and creation does not depend upon a struggle among competing gods. The distinction is therefore not simply that Israel had one God while Babylon had many. The deeper difference concerns the location of sovereignty itself. In the Babylonian conception, divine kingship is expressed within a cosmos populated by gods whose relationships and conflicts form part of the story of creation. In Genesis, the God who creates the cosmos is not presented as a participant within that cosmic order but as its source and sovereign.

This difference also changes the relationship between divine sovereignty and political power. Babylonian ideology could connect the supremacy of Marduk with the supremacy of Babylon and with the king who represented that order on earth. Israelite tradition, by contrast, increasingly developed a conception in which YHWH's authority could not be reduced to the fortunes of a particular king, city, or political institution. Human rulers could exercise authority, but their authority remained subject to a higher divine standard that stood beyond their own power. The distinction would become especially important as Israel's own monarchy and Temple later became subject to historical catastrophe.

This should not be described as though Israel suddenly arrived at a fully developed philosophical doctrine of an incorporeal or universal God. Israelite ideas about divine presence, representation, territory, kingship, and sovereignty developed over long periods and were expressed differently in different traditions. What can be observed historically is a gradual reorganization of familiar ancient categories around an increasingly distinctive conception of YHWH: a deity whose

presence could be associated with Israel while whose sovereignty was not ultimately confined to Israel's king, land, city, or Temple.

The significance of this development becomes clearer when Genesis presents creation itself as belonging to YHWH. The question is no longer simply which god protects which kingdom. If YHWH is the creator of the cosmos, then no human kingdom, king, or temple can be the ultimate source or limit of his authority. Political rulers may govern, and temples may serve as places of worship and divine presence, but neither determines the extent of God's rule. This distinction would become especially important when Israel's own monarchy and Temple later fell to foreign powers. Before turning to that catastrophe, however, it is necessary to understand how the covenant gave Israel a concrete way of organizing life under the authority of God.

Egypt and the Wider World

Egypt also provides an important comparative case. The biblical Exodus tradition presents Egypt through the experience of oppression, with Pharaoh becoming a powerful symbol of human authority resisting divine sovereignty. Historically, however, Egypt was far more than the villain of Israel's foundational story. It was one of the great civilizations of the ancient world, and the peoples of the southern Levant interacted with it for centuries through trade, migration, diplomacy, warfare, and imperial administration. Egypt had also witnessed a dramatic attempt to concentrate religious devotion around a single divine power during the reign of Akhenaten. It would be too simple to identify Atenism with later Israelite monotheism, and there is no sufficient evidence to claim that Israelite monotheism was simply borrowed from Egypt. Its importance lies elsewhere: the ancient world had already witnessed radical and contested experiments in the organization of divine power. Israel's distinctive development therefore needs to be understood within that wider world.

Israel Enters the Conversation

The ancient world was not culturally isolated, and Israelite religion should not be imagined as developing in complete separation from its surroundings. The Hebrew Bible preserves traditions that reflect the world of Canaan, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the broader ancient Near East, while also transforming those traditions in ways that became increasingly distinctive. Creation, kingship, divine council, sacred space, law, covenant, wisdom, prophecy, exile, and restoration all belong to wider ancient conversations. Israel inherited these concepts, adapted them, argued with them, and reorganized them around Israel's own understanding of its relationship with YHWH. The question, therefore, is not whether Israelite religion was influenced by the surrounding world, but how those inherited categories were transformed when they were placed within Israel's distinctive conception of divine sovereignty, covenant, history, and human obligation.

That wider religious world also included female divine figures who were eventually marginalized within Israel's developing conception of YHWH. Asherah, a prominent goddess in the broader West Semitic religious tradition, appears in archaeological and textual evidence associated with the religious world of ancient Israel and Judah. Some inscriptions, particularly those from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom, have been interpreted by scholars as evidence that at least some Israelites associated YHWH with Asherah, although the precise meaning of these references remains debated. What is historically significant is that the later normative tradition increasingly excludes female divinity from the official conception of Israel's God. This should not be imagined as the result of a single event or a simple decision by a unified male

priesthood, but as part of a much longer process in which competing divine traditions were marginalized as Yahwistic worship became increasingly centralized and exclusive. The result was a religious system in which divine sovereignty became more radically concentrated in one God, while the female divine presence that had existed within the wider religious landscape was progressively pushed to the margins

What makes Israelite religion historically distinctive must therefore be found not simply in the existence of one God, but in the particular combination of ideas through which Israelite writers connected divine sovereignty, covenant, law, justice, identity, history, and national catastrophe. That development also involved a process of religious exclusion: competing divine powers, cultic images, and eventually female divine figures were increasingly displaced from the normative conception of YHWH. The resulting tradition was therefore shaped not only by what it affirmed, but also by what it rejected and left behind.

Genesis and the Universalization of Divine Representation

Within the historical setting described above, Genesis 1 becomes particularly significant because it expresses in literary form a broader transformation in Israelite conceptions of divine sovereignty. The account does not merely describe the origins of the world; it presents a cosmos already ordered under the authority of a God who is not dependent upon the political institutions, sacred architecture, or divine hierarchy of any particular civilization. The sun, moon, and stars are not independent divine powers but created objects. The cosmos itself is not the product of a struggle among competing gods but the ordered work of Israel's God. Genesis therefore presents creation in a way that places YHWH's sovereignty beyond the political and religious structures through which other ancient societies understood divine rule.

The language of humanity being made “in the image of God” is particularly significant in this context. The concept itself was not an Israelite invention. Across the ancient Near East, divine representation was already expressed through traditions in which the king occupied a privileged relationship to the deity and could function as the deity's earthly representative or image. Such ideas connected political authority with divine authority: the ruler's legitimacy derived, in part, from his special status as the representative of the god on earth.

The idea becomes even more striking when placed within the ancient temple world. A temple was understood not simply as a building in which people worshiped but as the dwelling place of a deity, a kind of divine house in which the god's presence was represented through an image. Genesis 1 appears to recast this familiar world of temple symbolism on a cosmic scale. The ordered creation can be understood as God's cosmic dwelling, with the heavens forming its structure, the earth its inhabited realm, and the heavenly lights serving as its lamps. Yet within this cosmic temple there is no carved statue representing God. Instead, Genesis declares that human beings themselves are created as the image of God.

This does not mean that Genesis simply equates human beings with a god in the ancient sense, nor is the interpretation universally understood as a claim that humans literally embody the deity. The important point is that Genesis takes a category long associated with divine representation and applies it to living human beings. The human being becomes, in effect, a living representative of divine authority within the created world. The striking feature is therefore not that Israel invented the concept of divine representation, but that the biblical tradition recasts it by relocating representation from the cult image and the privileged ruler to humanity itself.

Genesis thus appears to take an older ideological framework and make a striking transformation in its distribution. Rather than restricting divine representation to the king or another privileged figure, Genesis 1 declares that humanity itself is created “in the image of God.” What had been associated particularly with royal status is presented as a characteristic of human beings generally.

This can be understood as a form of theological democratization. The authority to represent the divine is no longer confined to the ruler; humanity as such is granted a form of delegated dominion. The distinction between ruler and ruled therefore remains politically real, but the underlying claim about human status has been radically broadened. Every human being participates, at least in principle, in a dignity and responsibility that older royal ideologies had associated primarily with the king.

The importance of this transformation is easy to underestimate if the passage is read only as a statement about human dignity. Genesis is doing something more specific with an existing category of political and religious thought. The king may still govern, but he is no longer the only human being whose status is grounded in a relationship of divine representation. The category has been universalized.

This does not amount to a modern doctrine of political equality or human rights. Genesis does not abolish kingship, hierarchy, or distinctions of social authority. Its significance lies elsewhere. A concept once associated primarily with the ruler has been extended to humanity as a whole, establishing a theological basis for human status, responsibility, and delegated authority that does not depend entirely upon political rank.

The move is therefore both conservative and transformative. Genesis preserves the ancient association between divine representation and authority, but changes who bears that representation. The result is a conception in which human beings generally stand within a relationship to divine sovereignty that had previously been concentrated in the figure of the king.

The relationship becomes even clearer when Genesis 1–11 is read alongside the wider Mesopotamian traditions that provided an older cultural context. The *Enuma Elish* presents creation through the triumph of Marduk over Tiamat, the ordering of the cosmos, and the establishment of divine kingship; Genesis retains recognizable elements of this ancient cosmological world—the primordial waters, the separation of the upper and lower waters, the ordering of the heavens, and creation through divine speech—but removes the divine combat and places all cosmic powers beneath a single creator. The same pattern continues in Genesis 2–3, where themes of a sacred garden, human mortality, wisdom, the serpent, and the lost possibility of extraordinary longevity resonate with traditions preserved in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, particularly its concern with humanity's mortality and the elusive possibility of escaping death. The Flood narrative likewise belongs to a much older Mesopotamian tradition preserved most fully in *Atrahasis* and the flood episode of *Gilgamesh*, where a divinely sent catastrophe destroys humanity, a chosen survivor builds a vessel, preserves life, and eventually survives the waters. Genesis therefore did not invent the basic narrative categories of creation, paradise, mortality, or catastrophic flood; these belonged to the cultural world in which Israel developed its traditions. What Genesis does is more consequential precisely because it works with inherited material: it reorganizes familiar ancient stories around a different conception of God, humanity, moral responsibility, judgment, and the ordering of the world. The result is neither simple repetition nor wholesale invention, but a profound reworking of the stories through which the peoples of the

ancient Near East had long attempted to explain where the world came from, why human beings suffer and die, and what relationship exists between humanity and the divine.

From Universal Order to Covenant

The story then narrows from humanity as a whole to Abraham and his descendants. This transition is historically important because Abraham appears in the biblical tradition before Israel exists as a people and before anything resembling Judaism has emerged as a distinct historical religion. The Abraham of Genesis belongs to a Mesopotamian world, with his family tradition associated first with the city of Ur, one of the great centers of ancient southern Mesopotamia, and later with Haran. We cannot independently establish Abraham's historical identity or describe him with certainty in modern ethnic categories, but the narrative does not present him as though he were already "Jewish." He is an ancestral figure from whom Israel later traces its identity and whom Christianity and Islam subsequently regard as a foundational figure within their own traditions.

There is also a striking change in how the biblical tradition portrays the relationship between God and humanity at this point in the story. Genesis frequently depicts God interacting directly with its ancestral figures through appearances, conversations, and other forms of immediate encounter. Abraham belongs to the later part of this ancestral pattern and occupies a transitional position between the world of the patriarchs and the covenantal order that follows. As the biblical story develops, divine authority is increasingly expressed not through direct encounters with individual ancestors but through covenant, law, prophecy, worship, visions, and the institutions of a people.

The biblical tradition presents Abraham's election as part of a larger purpose: through one family, blessing is ultimately directed toward "all the families of the earth." This should not be treated as an independently verified divine plan, but as the way Israelite tradition retrospectively explained its own emergence and vocation. Abraham therefore becomes the point at which the universal concerns of creation and human responsibility are concentrated within a particular ancestral lineage and tradition. The movement is therefore from the universal to the particular and, eventually, back toward the universal: humanity, Abraham, Israel, and ultimately a conception of divine sovereignty whose horizon extends beyond Israel itself.

That development is mediated by another foundational tradition: the Exodus. The biblical narrative presents Israel's liberation from Egypt not simply as the escape of a dominated population but as a confrontation between competing claims to sovereignty. Pharaoh represents the concentrated power of the ancient state. He commands labor, controls resources, exercises political authority, and stands at the head of a system in which the population is subject to the demands of the ruler.

The historical development of the Exodus tradition, however, is more difficult to reconstruct than the biblical narrative suggests. The Exodus may preserve memories of an earlier experience involving a smaller group, but the surviving biblical account presents the event as the foundational liberation of Israel as a whole. The traditions surrounding the Exodus, Sinai, and covenant appear to have developed, circulated, and been combined over a long period, with important stages of their literary formation occurring centuries after the events they purport to describe. The narrative therefore cannot simply be read as a contemporary record of what happened in Egypt or at Sinai.

What can be examined is the way these traditions came to express Israel's understanding of its identity and relationship to divine authority. In the completed biblical tradition, liberation from Pharaoh becomes a foundational claim about allegiance to YHWH: Israel is freed from one form of human domination in order to live according to another form of sovereignty, one defined by its relationship with God. The Sinai covenant then gives that relationship a formal structure.

The biblical writers present covenant as the relationship through which Israel understands its obligations to YHWH, but covenant itself belongs to a much broader ancient Near Eastern world of treaties, royal obligations, oaths, law, and political loyalty. Ancient societies had already developed formal ways of describing relationships between rulers and subjects, obligations between political powers, and the responsibilities through which legitimate authority was maintained. The distinctive question is therefore not whether Israel participated in that wider tradition, but what Israelite writers did with the categories available to them.

The covenant was not simply a treaty between two human rulers. Its imagined sovereign was divine, and its obligations extended beyond political loyalty into worship, justice, economic conduct, treatment of vulnerable people, family life, and communal responsibility. The concept therefore transformed familiar political and legal language into a comprehensive account of how an entire community should live under divine sovereignty. Israel's conception of divine rule was not created in isolation, but emerged from a world already filled with gods, kings, temples, laws, treaties, empires, and competing claims to legitimacy. Its distinctive character lies not in escaping that world, but in reorganizing inherited categories around a particular conception of divine sovereignty, covenant, justice, and communal obligation.



Chapter Two

Sinai: Covenant, Law, and the Reign of God

The journey from Egypt reaches its conceptual destination not at the Red Sea but at Mount Sinai. The biblical tradition remembers Israel's departure from Egypt as a movement away from the power of Pharaoh, yet the social conditions behind that memory remain historically uncertain. The Exodus narrative describes Egypt as a place of bondage and oppression, but historians cannot independently reconstruct the experience of the population represented by the biblical Israelites with confidence. The historical background may have involved more complicated experiences of migration, displacement, labor, political instability, or changing economic circumstances than the later narrative preserves. None of these possibilities can presently be established as the historical explanation of the Exodus, but they caution against treating the biblical description of Egypt as a transparent account of social reality.

The wider setting, however, is historically important. Egypt's eastern Delta was not isolated from the peoples and cultures of the Levant. Archaeological evidence from Avaris, the later Hyksos capital at Tell el-Dab'a, shows sustained interaction between Egypt and Canaan, including substantial communities with Levantine cultural connections. Material culture, settlement patterns, and biological evidence point to continuing movement of people between the Nile Delta and the Near East rather than a simple division between an Egyptian population and a foreign population that suddenly appeared.

The southern regions beyond Egypt present another important question. Egyptian records from the second millennium BCE contain a reference to Yhwꜣ among groups identified with the Shasu, although the meaning and geographical implications of the term remain debated. Some scholars have connected this evidence with the later name Yahweh and with biblical traditions that associate YHWH with regions such as Sinai, Seir, Edom, and Paran. Others caution that the

Egyptian evidence does not identify Yhw3 unambiguously as a deity or establish a southern origin for Yahweh. The evidence therefore does not permit a simple reconstruction of YHWH as a deity who was imported into Israel from the Sinai region, but it does indicate that the history of the name and the religious traditions associated with it may reach beyond the later boundaries of Israel.

The religious environment was similarly interconnected. Northwest Semitic traditions included powerful storm-god imagery associated with thunder, rain, clouds, mountains, fertility, kingship, and divine warfare, and some scholars have argued that early portrayals of YHWH preserve elements of this wider storm-god tradition. Other scholars dispute whether such characteristics represent YHWH's original identity or a later development. What can be said with greater confidence is that the biblical portrayal of YHWH emerged within the religious world of the ancient Levant rather than in isolation from it.

Egypt itself had also witnessed striking experiments in religious universalism. Akhenaten's fourteenth-century BCE Atenism centered exclusive worship on the Aten and portrayed the deity as creator and sustainer of life. Although no direct line of influence from Atenism to Israelite monotheism can be demonstrated, its existence illustrates that ideas about divine universality and exclusive devotion were already being explored in the wider eastern Mediterranean world long before the biblical texts were composed in their surviving forms.

The significance of this broader context is that Israel's conception of divine sovereignty did not emerge in an empty religious landscape. It developed within an interconnected world of Egypt, Canaan, and the southern Levant in which ideas about gods, kingship, creation, divine authority, and human obligation were already circulating. Israelite tradition did not simply reproduce those ideas, however; it transformed inherited categories into a distinctive conception of divine sovereignty and communal life.

What matters for the present study is therefore less whether the Exodus occurred exactly as narrated than how the tradition ultimately makes the memory of departure mean. Freedom from Pharaoh is not presented as freedom from every form of authority. The narrative transforms liberation into a question of sovereignty. If a people is no longer subject to one human ruler, what authority is to govern its life instead? Sinai provides the tradition's answer: the community is to understand itself as living under the sovereignty attributed to YHWH. The journey therefore moves conceptually from liberation to allegiance, and from allegiance to the organization of communal life. Sinai is where the memory of liberation becomes a theory of legitimate authority.

Covenant and Legitimate Authority

A people without the political power of a great empire would have needed ways to maintain identity, obligation, authority, and communal solidarity across generations. Covenant provided such a framework. By attributing the community's obligations to a sovereign beyond any human ruler, the tradition could establish standards that applied not only to ordinary members of the community but also to kings, priests, wealthy families, judges, and political institutions. Divine sovereignty therefore functioned simultaneously as a source of authority and as a limit upon human authority.

This possibility should not be reduced to the claim that religion was simply invented as a mechanism of social control. Such a conclusion would explain too little. A covenantal conception of divine rule could certainly reinforce obedience, but it could also restrain rulers,

condemn exploitation, preserve communal identity under foreign domination, and provide a language through which existing political arrangements could be challenged. The same conception of divine sovereignty that commanded obedience could therefore become the standard by which obedience itself was judged.

This relationship between divine and royal authority provides an important background for understanding the biblical conception of law. The question confronting Israelite tradition was not whether a society should possess an order. Every organized ancient society did. The more revealing question was who had the authority to define that order.

In Mesopotamian royal ideology, the king occupied the central political position. Divine authority legitimized his rule, and the king represented himself as the agent through whom justice was established. Israelite tradition increasingly displaced that political center. The king could govern, but he was not supposed to possess unlimited authority. He remained subject to a law understood to stand above him.

That development turns the familiar relationship between deity and ruler in a different direction. Rather than divine authority simply legitimizing the human monarch, Israelite tradition could use divine authority to judge the monarch. The king could become the violator of the law; the prophet could confront the king; the nation could be condemned despite the presence of its royal institution; and the standard of justice remained outside the control of the political ruler.

The Sinai tradition adapts familiar ancient Near Eastern forms of treaty and oath to this different relationship. The sovereign is not a human emperor, the covenant community is not simply a conquered province, and the relationship is not merely a political arrangement between human parties. Within the covenantal framework, communal obligations are attributed to divine authority rather than to the will of a human ruler. Human authorities therefore govern under a standard they do not themselves create.

The commandments are introduced only after the declaration, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." The literary order is significant. Israel does not obey in order to purchase its freedom; freedom comes first, followed by the question of how a liberated people should live. Covenant therefore establishes more than a collection of religious laws. It defines the terms by which Israel is to exist as a community, regulates relationships, and provides a framework through which authority and justice can be ordered.

The laws themselves extend beyond ritual into property, debt, labor, family relationships, economic exchange, judicial procedure, treatment of strangers and slaves, care for the vulnerable, agricultural practice, and the rhythms of communal life. The covenant thus functions, within the biblical tradition, as a framework for the organization of society. The analogy to a social constitution is functional rather than institutional: ancient Israel did not possess a modern constitution or democratic political system, but the covenant established obligations against which rulers, institutions, and ordinary members of the community could be judged.

A Kingdom of Priests

The Sinai tradition expresses this vocation in one of its most revealing statements. Before the commandments are given, the people are told: "If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples... and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Whatever historical development lies behind the final form of this text, the literary conception is striking. Israel is not merely told that it belongs to a deity; it is assigned a role in relation to the nations surrounding it. The language of priesthood suggests representation, while election is joined to obligation and vocation. Israel's distinctiveness is therefore supposed to be demonstrated through the character of its communal life rather than simply through its possession of a privileged status.

This also distinguishes Israelite election from a simple claim of political superiority. Empires and kings routinely justified themselves through divine favor, but the biblical tradition could turn election against the political establishment itself. The people could be chosen and yet judged; the king could be anointed and yet condemned; Jerusalem could contain the Temple and yet be destroyed. Election therefore did not guarantee political success. It created an obligation under divine sovereignty, and failure to fulfill that obligation became one of the central subjects of Israelite historical interpretation.

When the Chosen People Lose

The relationship between covenant and history becomes especially revealing when Israel suffers political catastrophe. If Israel's God was understood to be its sovereign, why did foreign powers repeatedly defeat Israel? The ancient world possessed an obvious answer: if one kingdom defeated another, the victory could be interpreted as evidence of the superior power of the victor's deity. A conquered people might lose its temple, sacred objects, political institutions, and territorial independence, making the defeat of the people appear to demonstrate the defeat of their god.

Israelite tradition developed a different explanation. Assyria could defeat Israel, Babylon could destroy Jerusalem, the Temple could be burned, and the population could be deported without these events proving that YHWH had been defeated. The biblical writers increasingly interpreted catastrophe through covenantal failure: Israel's defeat could instead be understood as the consequence of its own violation of the covenant. The conqueror had won the battle, but had not defeated the deity.

From a historical perspective, we need not accept the theological explanation in order to recognize its function. It allowed Israelite communities to interpret repeated political disasters without surrendering their central claim about divine sovereignty. Prosperity could be remembered as blessing, defeat as judgment, exile as punishment, and return as restoration. Covenant therefore became more than a set of obligations governing the present; it became a framework through which the past itself could be remembered and interpreted.

This double function of election is crucial. It establishes belonging while simultaneously establishing accountability. If Israel's identity derives from a claimed relationship with a divine sovereign, the same relationship can be used to judge Israel when its conduct violates the order attributed to that sovereign. The closer the claimed relationship between God and the people, the greater the consequences of violating its obligations.

Cyrus and the Reversal of Exile

The Persian conquest of Babylon provides a revealing comparison because it demonstrates how imperial rulers themselves could present conquest as restoration. In 539 BCE, Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon. The Cyrus Cylinder presents Cyrus within traditional Babylonian royal ideology, describing Marduk's selection of him to restore order and recording claims concerning

the restoration of temples, cults, and displaced peoples. The inscription does not describe a modern concept of religious freedom or human rights; it belongs to the political and religious conventions of the ancient Near East. Yet its portrayal of restoration illustrates how an imperial ruler could present himself as the agent through whom legitimate order was recovered.

The biblical book of Ezra presents Cyrus in strikingly similar terms, although within Israel's own theological framework. Cyrus becomes the ruler who permits the Judean exiles to return and authorizes the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple. The comparison is instructive: Babylonian tradition can portray Cyrus as the chosen agent of Marduk, while biblical tradition can portray him as an instrument of YHWH. The political event is the same; the interpretive framework is different.

This illustrates a broader historical process. Ancient peoples did not simply record political events; they interpreted them through inherited religious and political categories. Israelite tradition was not isolated from imperial ideology but participated in a larger ancient practice of explaining political change through the language of divine sovereignty.

Covenant, Neighbor, and Social Order

The covenant's significance extends beyond the relationship between Israel and its rulers. It also determines how members of the community are expected to treat one another. The first commandments establish exclusive loyalty to God, while the remaining commandments govern life within the covenant community. Although modern readers often divide these into religious and ethical categories, the biblical tradition treats them as inseparable. Fidelity to God is expressed not only through worship and obedience but also through the treatment of other human beings.

The command to love one's neighbor in Leviticus 19:18 is especially important. It appears within a concrete social setting: Israel is forbidden to take vengeance or bear a grudge against members of its own community and is instead commanded to love its neighbor as itself. The Hebrew term *rēa'*, translated as "neighbor," can refer to a fellow, companion, associate, or person within one's social world. The command therefore addresses relationships that are immediate and practical—the people with whom one lives, trades, disputes, works, worships, and competes. These are precisely the relationships in which resentment, retaliation, exploitation, and violence can arise.

The historical question is therefore not simply when the words of Leviticus were written, but whether the social problem to which they respond may be older than the text itself. A later law can preserve, reshape, and theologize an earlier social insight. The wording may belong to a mature literary tradition even while the underlying problem reaches back generations before the text assumed its present form. If so, neighbor-love may represent not the sudden invention of a moral ideal but the eventual religious expression of a problem communities had been forced to confront long before they possessed the institutions of a kingdom.

From Solidarity to Moral Obligation

The historical emergence of Israel provides a possible setting for this development. Archaeology does not present the emergence of Israel as the simple arrival of a single, homogeneous population into an otherwise empty land. During Iron Age I, new settlements appeared throughout the central highlands, but the origins of these communities remain debated. Scholars have proposed combinations of migration, pastoral groups becoming sedentary, internal social transformation, and other processes through which populations already present across Canaan,

including its coastal regions, together with groups moving into new settlements, may have contributed to the social formation that eventually became Israel.

Whatever precise combination of processes is reconstructed, the important point is that Israel emerged as a developing social formation within a landscape that was itself undergoing profound transformation. Egyptian influence was changing, Canaanite political centers were being disrupted or reorganized, movements associated with the Sea Peoples were reshaping parts of the region, and patterns of political power were shifting. Israel was therefore becoming identifiable not in isolation, but within a wider environment of uncertainty, competition, migration, and changing relationships among neighboring communities.

The Merneptah Stele, generally dated to the late thirteenth century BCE, is significant precisely because it confirms that a population identified as Israel was already present in Canaan by that time. The inscription does not describe the centralized kingdom known from the later biblical narratives. Israel is identified as a people. Whatever the precise political organization behind the name, this suggests that the earliest Israel known outside the Bible was understood not primarily as a city-state but as a distinct population within the land.

Before Israel could become a kingdom, therefore, it had to become a people. Before it could establish centralized institutions, its constituent communities had to recognize some larger relationship among themselves. The historical problem was not simply how to occupy territory or resist external powers, but how separate communities could form a society capable, at least under certain circumstances, of acting as though it belonged to a common order.

The biblical tradition remembers this process through the twelve tribes, although the historical reality behind the tribal lists cannot be reconstructed with certainty. Like the foundation traditions of many ancient peoples, the twelve-tribe tradition expresses a way of imagining how distinct communities came to understand themselves as part of a larger people. Whether the tradition corresponds closely to an actual historical arrangement is less important here than what the tradition itself communicates.

Judah remains Judah, Ephraim remains Ephraim, and Reuben remains Reuben, yet each is simultaneously part of Israel. The unity is therefore not created by eliminating difference but by placing difference within a larger relationship.

If the communities that eventually constituted Israel were diverse in origin and organization, then the creation of a larger identity among them would have required more than a common name. It would have required expectations of mutual obligation. Different communities could remain distinct while recognizing that certain forms of behavior toward one another were no longer acceptable because the continued existence of each community had become connected to the security of the others.

This possibility becomes clearer when the formation of Israel is placed within the realities of the land itself. Communities establishing themselves in the highlands were interacting with populations that had already occupied the land, neighboring settlements, emerging coastal powers, and one another. Land, water, pasture, agricultural production, trade routes, and security were not abstract questions. They were the basic conditions of survival, and disputes over any of them could affect entire communities.

In such an environment, conflict between neighboring communities could become extraordinarily destructive. A dispute over land could become a dispute between families; a

dispute between families could become a conflict between clans; and a conflict between clans could acquire a history that outlived the original cause. Where retaliation was accepted as a legitimate response to injury, every act of violence created the possibility of another. A community living under conditions of uncertainty therefore required not only courage against its enemies but also ways of preventing its own members from becoming enemies to one another. It needed distinctions between legitimate defense and vengeance, justice and retaliation, communal discipline and private violence.

The solution need not originally have been religious. Communities everywhere have had to develop customs governing reciprocity, hospitality, compensation, property, marriage, trade, and the settlement of disputes. Such practices can emerge simply because people discover that unrestricted conflict makes collective life impossible. Israel's later covenantal tradition, however, could take these practical necessities and place them within a theological framework. The rule would no longer be merely, "Do this because the community functions better when you do." It would become, "Do this because this is what the God of the covenant requires."

That transformation is crucial. The neighbor is no longer merely someone whose cooperation is useful. The neighbor becomes someone to whom one owes something. Utility asks what another person contributes to my survival; obligation asks what I am required to do for that person regardless of immediate advantage. This is the point at which solidarity begins to become morality.

Leviticus 19:18 represents this transformation. The command to love the neighbor appears alongside prohibitions against vengeance and grudge-bearing, placing interpersonal conduct within the larger holiness demanded of Israel. The neighbor is not protected merely because social peace is useful. The neighbor is protected because Israel belongs to God.

The command's closing declaration, "I am the LORD," identifies the claimed source of the obligation. Human beings are not permitted to determine their responsibilities entirely according to their own interests because their lives are understood within a covenantal order attributed to God. The covenant binds the people vertically in allegiance to God and horizontally in responsibility toward one another.

The social consequence is significant. The offended person cannot simply become judge and executioner. The aggrieved family cannot transform every injury into a permanent obligation of revenge. The powerful cannot assume that the weakness of another person removes that person's claim upon them. Covenant establishes a moral order in which the neighbor possesses a claim upon the self, and in which obligations between people are no longer determined solely by power, advantage, or retaliation.

The Neighbor and the Stranger

The principle becomes even more significant when the same chapter extends its concern beyond the ordinary member of the community. Leviticus 19 later commands Israel not to oppress the stranger residing among them and instructs Israelites to treat the stranger as a native-born person and to love the stranger as themselves. The justification is drawn from Israel's own remembered experience: they too had been strangers in Egypt.

The historical importance of this development lies in the fact that moral concern begins to move beyond simple reciprocity among equals. The stranger does not necessarily possess the same ancestry or social status as the Israelite, yet the stranger becomes an object of covenantal

responsibility because Israel is commanded to remember its own vulnerability. Memory therefore becomes moral: Israel's past becomes a reason for how Israel must treat another human being in the present.

This does not erase every distinction between Israelite and stranger, and the biblical traditions remain far from a simple doctrine of universal equality. Nevertheless, the circle of moral concern has begun to widen. Once an obligation toward the neighbor is grounded in covenant rather than merely in mutual advantage, the boundaries of responsibility become open to further questioning.

The prophets intensify this development by making social justice a measure of covenantal faithfulness. Their concern repeatedly extends toward the widow, the orphan, the poor, the laborer, the stranger, and those whose lack of power makes them vulnerable to exploitation. The question is no longer simply whether Israel performs the correct rituals or maintains the correct institutions. It is whether the society itself reflects the character of the God to whom it claims allegiance.

It would be misleading to describe this as a smooth progression from tribal morality to universal humanitarianism. Ancient Israel retained strong distinctions between insiders and outsiders, and biblical traditions sometimes emphasize those distinctions sharply. The biblical corpus is internally diverse, and its ethical traditions developed over long periods. The more careful historical claim is narrower: a principle rooted in immediate social relationships could acquire a capacity for expansion once it was understood as a covenantal obligation rather than merely as an arrangement of mutual advantage.

Love of God and Love of Neighbor

This development helps explain the remarkable symmetry between love of God and love of neighbor. The first establishes the ultimate allegiance of the community; the second governs the relationships within the community that claims that allegiance. The two dimensions therefore reinforce one another. Allegiance to God establishes the framework within which the community understands its obligations, while responsibility toward the neighbor gives that allegiance social form.

Centuries later, when Jesus is asked to identify the greatest commandment, he does not set the Torah aside. Instead, he draws together two passages that summarize what he understands to be its deepest intention. He declares, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength," and then adds, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." He concludes that there is no commandment greater than these. Elsewhere, the Gospel tradition states that "on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Whatever later Christian interpretation would make of these words, their historical significance within the argument of this study is straightforward. Jesus is not presenting love of God and love of neighbor as a new ethical system detached from Israel's covenant. He is identifying what he understands to be the deepest expression of the existing covenantal order. The two dimensions belong together: allegiance to God establishes the vertical relationship of ultimate loyalty, while responsibility toward one's neighbor gives that allegiance social expression.

From Covenant to Kingdom

At this point, the relationship between covenant and Kingdom becomes clearer. The covenant does not simply describe a private religious relationship between a deity and a people. Within the

biblical tradition, it establishes an order of life. It defines obligations, limits power, structures relationships, provides a standard by which the community can judge itself, and gives historical experience a framework through which prosperity, catastrophe, exile, and restoration can be understood.

In that sense, covenant provides the framework of divine rule. The Kingdom, by contrast, describes the realization of that rule. Covenant answers the question of what life under divine sovereignty is supposed to look like; Kingdom raises the question of what happens when that sovereignty becomes effective within history.

The answers to that question are already being prepared within the covenantal tradition. They concern the treatment of the vulnerable, the limits of political power, the obligations owed to one's neighbor, the relationship between worship and justice, and the possibility of a society ordered according to a standard that human rulers do not themselves control. The prophets will take these tensions further by examining the distance between covenantal ideals and historical reality. They will ask why a people that claims allegiance to God nevertheless produces injustice, corruption, exploitation, violence, and political failure. Their response will not simply be to abandon the covenant, but to interpret Israel's crises through it and to articulate hopes for judgment, renewal, restoration, and a future in which divine sovereignty is more fully realized.

This is the historical bridge from covenant to Kingdom. The Kingdom does not arrive in an intellectual vacuum. Its conceptual background includes ancient ideas of divine kingship, royal justice, treaty obligation, communal responsibility, political catastrophe, exile, restoration, and the persistent problem of how human beings might actually live under a sovereignty greater than their own.

The next chapter therefore turns to the prophets—not as supernatural predictors whose words can simply be read as forecasts of later events, but as historical voices interpreting Israel's crises through the inherited language of covenant, justice, divine sovereignty, judgment, and restoration. Their message will reveal something crucial: the Kingdom of God is not simply the hope that God will one day defeat Israel's enemies. It is the hope that the disorder produced by human failure will finally be replaced by a form of life consistent with the justice the covenant had always demanded.



Chapter Three

The Prophets and the Invention of Covenant History

The covenantal framework established in the preceding chapter becomes most revealing when we turn to the prophetic books. In the biblical tradition, the prophets appear as voices confronting a society that has failed to live according to the order associated with its covenant with YHWH. They criticize rulers, priests, merchants, judges, landowners, and ordinary citizens, linking religious practice with political behavior, economic exploitation, judicial corruption, and the treatment of the vulnerable. Their message is therefore much broader than a call to private religious devotion. They address the way an entire society organizes power, wealth, justice, worship, and communal responsibility.

Historically, however, the prophets should not be approached simply as mouthpieces delivering a timeless divine message. They emerged within particular political crises and social environments, and the books that preserve their words are themselves literary collections that developed over time. The historical prophet and the later prophetic book are related, but they are not necessarily identical. What survives is a combination of remembered speech, literary composition, editorial interpretation, and theological reflection. Modern scholarship therefore studies both the historical realities that may stand behind these texts and the ways later communities shaped and reused those traditions.

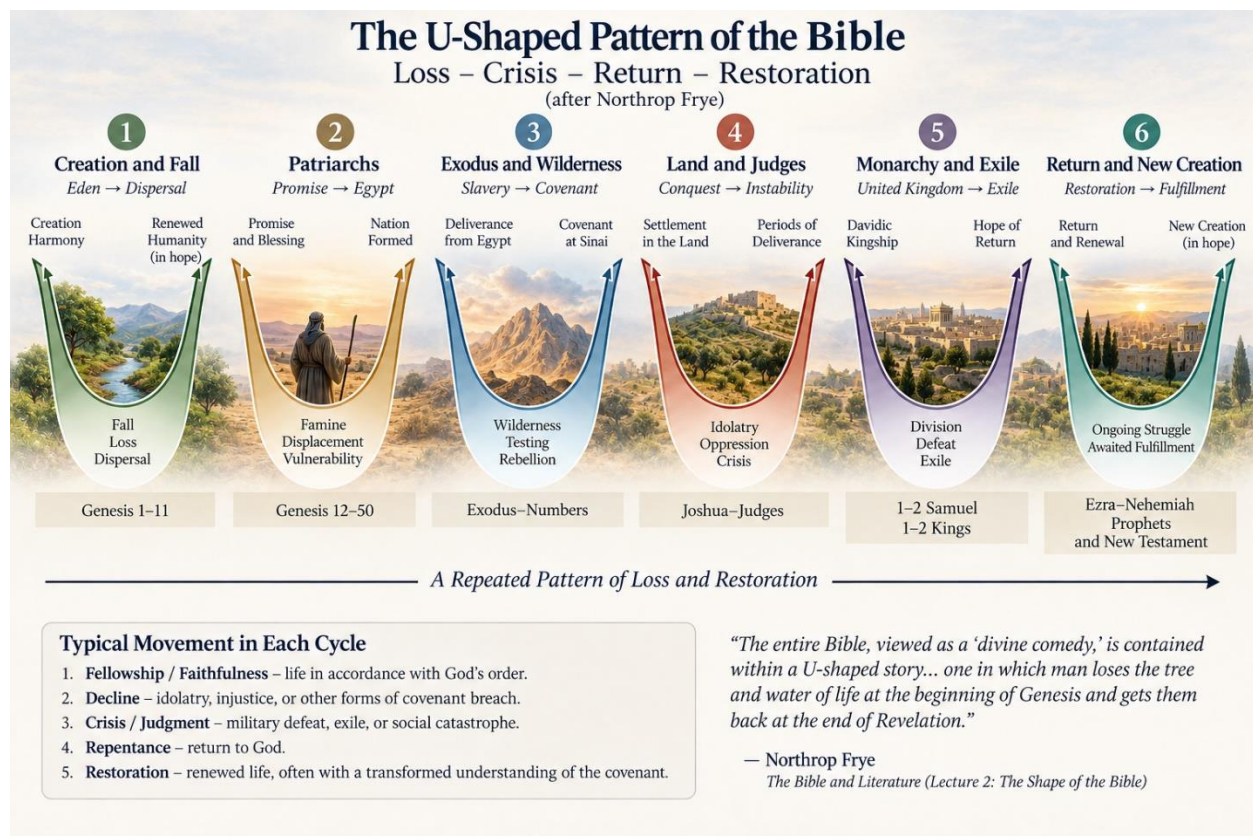
This distinction matters because the prophetic literature gives us access to more than religious belief. It provides evidence for how Israelite communities attempted to understand the crises that repeatedly confronted them. Assyrian expansion, the destruction of the northern kingdom, Babylonian conquest, the destruction of Jerusalem, exile, and subsequent foreign domination became occasions for asking what these events meant and why they had happened. The answers

would become one of the most consequential developments in the historical interpretation of Israel itself.

The Pattern of Covenant History

The biblical writers did not generally present Israel's past as a random succession of victories and defeats. They organized it according to a recurring pattern: faithfulness, decline, crisis, judgment, repentance, and restoration. Periods of stability could be followed by corruption or idolatry; corruption could lead to military defeat or social catastrophe; catastrophe could produce repentance; and repentance could open the possibility of restoration. Israel's history was therefore increasingly remembered as a covenantal drama in which political and social events were interpreted according to the community's relationship to the order associated with YHWH.

Literary critic Northrop Frye observed that this recurring movement helps illuminate one of the Bible's distinctive narrative patterns: a descent followed by restoration, a "U-shaped" movement extending through stories from Eden and the Exodus to the Judges, monarchy, exile, and prophetic hope of return.



The U-Shaped Pattern of Covenant History: An adaptation of Northrop Frye's observation that biblical narratives repeatedly follow a U-shaped movement from loss and crisis toward return and restoration. Across successive episodes—from Eden and the patriarchal traditions through the Exodus, Judges, monarchy, exile, and the later hope of restoration—the biblical story repeatedly moves downward into disruption before turning toward renewal. The pattern is presented here as a literary and theological structure through which Israel's history was remembered and interpreted, not as a literal cycle of historical events. Adapted from Northrop Frye's 1980 lecture, "The Shape of the Bible," in the Bible and Literature series.

The importance of the observation here is not that the Bible records a literal historical cycle, but that its writers repeatedly interpreted history through such a pattern. The historian need not decide whether God actually caused a famine, sent an invading army, or restored a nation after repentance to recognize the interpretive mechanism at work. Prosperity could be read as blessing, defeat as judgment, exile as punishment, and return as restoration. History itself became the arena in which covenant meaning was worked out.

This transformed the meaning of Israel's past. Military defeat could become more than military defeat, and exile could be incorporated into a larger moral and political narrative. For a relatively small people repeatedly subjected to larger powers, catastrophe did not necessarily mean the failure of Israel's God. Instead, it could become evidence of Israel's own failure to live according to the standard it claimed to have received.

What Did "Turning Away from God" Mean?

When the biblical writers describe Israel as having "turned away from God," they are therefore not referring simply to private religious unbelief or individual moral failure. The phrase encompasses a broad social and political diagnosis. Idolatry is condemned because it represents a rival allegiance. Foreign alliances can be condemned because political dependence is interpreted as misplaced trust. Economic exploitation becomes a covenant violation because the community's treatment of its weakest members reveals whether justice is actually being practiced. Judicial corruption becomes a religious offense because the courts are supposed to embody the same standard of justice associated with the covenant. The concentration of power in the hands of kings becomes dangerous because kings themselves remain subject to an authority greater than the monarchy.

This does not mean that every Israelite society actually lived according to a single coherent covenantal system and then periodically abandoned it. The historical reality was more complicated. Israel and Judah were not static societies, and religious practices varied across regions, periods, institutions, and social groups. The prophetic texts instead preserve a critical vision of society, measuring Israel's conduct against a particular conception of what covenantal life ought to be. The prophets are valuable not because they give us an objective transcript of Israelite society, but because they reveal the standards by which at least some Israelite and Judean writers believed society should be judged.

The same principle applies to Israel's sacred institutions. Prophetic criticism repeatedly targets people who continue to sacrifice, celebrate festivals, maintain the Temple, and perform the outward practices of religion while violating the social obligations associated with the covenant. The problem, from the prophetic perspective, was not necessarily the existence of religious institutions but the assumption that they could guarantee divine favor independently of how the community lived. Sacred space, priestly authority, ritual observance, and national identity could become substitutes for the covenantal order they were supposed to embody. The Temple, in particular, could become a symbol mistaken for the realization of divine rule.

Amos and the Problem of Prosperity

Amos provides one of the clearest examples. The book associated with him places his activity during the reigns of Jeroboam II of Israel and Uzziah of Judah, a period remembered for considerable political strength and prosperity in the northern kingdom. Rather than celebrating that prosperity, Amos attacks the social conditions beneath it. His targets include wealthy elites

who accumulate property, exploit debtors, manipulate economic exchange, and benefit from judicial systems that disadvantage the poor. Religious observance continues, but Amos insists that worship cannot compensate for social injustice.

His most famous demand is therefore not for more elaborate ritual but for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." The force of Amos's argument lies in his refusal to separate religious devotion from social behavior. The problem is not simply that some individuals are personally immoral; the social order itself has become inconsistent with the values that the prophetic tradition associates with YHWH. Historically, this is significant because covenantal language could function as a critique of the existing political and economic order. The covenant was not merely a mechanism for reinforcing authority. It could also become the vocabulary through which authority was challenged.

Isaiah and the Failure of Sacred Performance

Isaiah develops the critique from another direction. The opening chapters associated with Isaiah portray a society filled with sacrifices, festivals, prayers, and ritual observance while simultaneously accusing its leaders and population of injustice. The prophetic argument refuses to allow religious performance to compensate for social failure. The widow, the orphan, the poor, and the oppressed become the test: if worship continues while the vulnerable are abused, then the religious system has failed to embody the justice it claims to represent.

The historical value of this argument lies partly in the internal debate it reveals within Israelite religion. The prophetic tradition does not simply stand outside Israel's religious system and reject it; it argues from within, claiming that its own principles have been violated. The prophets are therefore not necessarily revolutionaries attempting to abolish the covenant. They are often internal critics of the community that claims to possess it. This provides an important bridge to the Kingdom concept: the movement does not require an entirely new moral framework, because the prophetic critique preserves the covenant while exposing the distance between its ideals and historical reality.

Jeremiah and the Collapse of Jerusalem

Jeremiah speaks from an even more dramatic historical setting. The final decades of the kingdom of Judah were marked by the growing power of Babylon and increasingly desperate political choices by the Judean leadership. Jeremiah's prophetic tradition challenges both political confidence and religious complacency, particularly the belief that the Temple itself guarantees Jerusalem's security.

The logic was understandable. If YHWH was associated with the Temple, and if YHWH was Israel's God, then why should Jerusalem fear destruction? Jeremiah's answer is that sacred space cannot substitute for ethical and political responsibility. Israelite tradition had rejected the idea that its God could be reduced to a physical image, yet the Temple had nevertheless become the principal institutional and symbolic location associated with divine presence. The tradition could therefore insist that YHWH was not literally contained within the sanctuary while simultaneously treating the sanctuary as the center of divine presence among the people. Jeremiah's criticism exposes the danger in treating that symbol as a guarantee of national security regardless of how the community behaves.

The Temple does not protect a society that exploits the stranger, the orphan, and the widow while shedding innocent blood. The building can remain standing, sacrifices can continue, and rituals

can be performed while the society itself violates the principles through which God's reign is supposed to be expressed. When Jerusalem eventually falls in 586 BCE, the catastrophe gives this argument historical force. Judah's political structure collapses, the Temple is destroyed, elite populations are deported, and the Davidic monarchy ceases to function as an independent institution. Yet the covenantal tradition has already developed a way of absorbing the catastrophe: the covenant itself can explain the disaster.

Covenant and the Meaning of Catastrophe

This may be one of the most important developments in the prophetic and Deuteronomistic traditions. A conquered people has to explain why it lost. One possible explanation is that its god was weaker than the gods of the conquerors. The Israelite tradition generally rejects that conclusion and increasingly places responsibility upon Israel itself.

Modern scholars have often described this as a form of theodicy: a way of explaining how catastrophe can occur without abandoning the sovereignty or justice attributed to God. The Deuteronomistic History is especially important here. Deuteronomy through Kings presents Israel's history through the standards of Deuteronomic covenant theology, interpreting the collapse of Israel and Judah in terms of failure to obey those standards.

The important point for this study is not whether the theological explanation is true, but what the explanation accomplishes. Israel's defeat does not have to prove that Israel's God has been defeated. Instead, catastrophe can be interpreted as evidence that Israel itself has violated the covenant and that its institutions have failed to embody the order they claim to represent. The conqueror wins militarily, but does not thereby become the ultimate interpreter of the event. Israelite writers retain control over its meaning. This is an extraordinary form of cultural resilience: a people can lose its kingdom and still preserve its claim to divine sovereignty, lose its Temple and still maintain that its God has not been defeated, and lose political independence while interpreting its history as part of a larger story. Catastrophe is transformed into covenantal meaning, and the covenant becomes a vocabulary for turning political defeat into moral history and communal responsibility.

A military defeat is therefore not simply erased or denied; it is reinterpreted. The very fact that Israel could experience catastrophe while retaining its covenantal claims creates a distinctive relationship between historical memory and theological interpretation. The past becomes something that later generations can revisit, explain, and use to judge their own circumstances. This makes covenant more than a set of present obligations: it becomes a framework through which a community can understand why its institutions failed and what restoration would require.

The Prophets and the Critique of Power

This also explains why the prophets so often confront kings and elites. Within the covenantal framework, communal obligations are attributed to divine authority rather than to the will of a human ruler. Human authorities therefore govern under a standard they do not themselves create. A king may possess military power, control the courts, command taxation, build monuments, and claim divine favor, but he nevertheless remains subject to that standard. Nathan confronts David, Elijah confronts Ahab, Amos confronts the wealthy elite, Isaiah challenges political confidence, and Jeremiah confronts the leadership of Jerusalem. The historical details vary, and the literary

traditions surrounding these figures developed over time, but the recurring pattern is clear: divine authority becomes a language through which human power can be judged.

The prophetic critique also reaches beyond the behavior of individual rulers. If the social order is corrupt, changing one official or punishing one offender does not resolve the deeper problem. The recurring concern is whether institutions themselves reflect the standards they claim to serve. Courts, temples, monarchies, economic arrangements, and communal identities can all become instruments of injustice when they are treated as ends in themselves. The prophetic imagination therefore contains a structural dimension: it asks not only whether people are righteous, but whether the arrangements through which people exercise power permit justice to flourish.

This is one of the consequential developments within Israelite political thought. The same religious tradition that legitimizes the covenant can also limit political authority. The king does not own the covenant, the priest does not own it, the wealthy do not own it, and the nation itself does not own it. All remain subject to the standard the covenant represents. As Jewish communities later experience successive foreign empires, this principle provides a basis not only for maintaining communal identity but also for evaluating the claims of those who exercise power over the community. The sovereign may be Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Hellenistic, or Roman, but the covenantal imagination retains a standard against which earthly authority can be measured.

The Prophetic Hope

The prophets do not stop with condemnation. Their literature also contains a persistent expectation of renewal, although very different texts should not be flattened into a single prediction of the future. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Micah, Zechariah, and other prophetic traditions speak from different periods and circumstances, and their visions of restoration differ substantially. Jeremiah imagines a renewed relationship in which divine instruction is written upon the heart. Ezekiel describes restoration through cleansing, a new heart, and a new spirit. Isaiah envisions a restored Zion associated with justice and instruction extending outward. Micah imagines a future in which justice and peace characterize human relationships, while Zechariah depicts a transformed political and sacred order in which YHWH's kingship becomes universal. The prophets did not all describe one identical future event in a sequence that leads directly to Jesus' life and mission. They came from different periods and addressed different crises, and their visions of restoration varied. Later Christian interpretation brought many of these passages together and read them in relation to Jesus, but that is a later interpretive development, not something we should project backward onto all the prophetic texts.

The common thread is especially important. The answer to Israel's failures is not necessarily the abandonment of covenant but its renewal. Justice, mercy, loyalty, and faithfulness are not mistaken ideals; the problem is that human communities repeatedly fail to embody them. The prophetic hope therefore looks toward a future in which the relationship between divine sovereignty and human life is restored, so that the principles attributed to God's rule might once again become visible in communal life.

This is a significant development in the history of the Kingdom concept. The future hope is not simply that God will defeat Israel's enemies or restore territorial sovereignty. It includes the restoration of a social and moral order. Hearts must change, justice must return, political power must be reordered, and the relationship between God and humanity

must become visible in the character of communal life. The prophetic hope therefore moves beyond the preservation of covenant toward its effective realization.

From Restoration to Kingdom

At this point, the relationship between covenant and Kingdom becomes historically clearer. The covenant provides a *vocabulary* for describing the order that Israelite tradition presents as governing communal life. The prophets *expose* the distance between that ideal and historical reality, while the hope of *restoration* imagines a future in which that distance is overcome. **The Kingdom of God, when it later appears as a central expression in Jewish and specifically Jesus-movement discourse, therefore, enters an already developed field of ideas.** It does not arrive in an intellectual vacuum. The language of divine kingship has been shaped by centuries of reflection on monarchy, law, injustice, foreign domination, exile, restoration, and the limitations of human power.

By the time Jewish society enters the Second Temple and Roman periods, these questions have acquired additional urgency. Israel and Judah have passed through Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, and Hellenistic domination before arriving under Roman rule. The political landscape has changed repeatedly, but the underlying problem remains recognizable: how can a people maintain its identity, justice, and relationship to its traditions while living under powers it does not control? The covenantal tradition has survived in part because it provides a language through which foreign domination, political failure, communal responsibility, and hopes of restoration can all be interpreted within a larger historical framework.

This is the world into which the proclamation of the Kingdom of God will eventually be heard. Jesus' announcement that the Kingdom has drawn near therefore cannot be understood as an isolated religious statement. *It belongs to a much longer historical conversation about sovereignty, covenant, catastrophe, restoration, and the possibility that the existing order might finally be transformed.* The Kingdom cannot therefore be reduced to a timetable for the end of the world. Its background is the longer argument about what happens when human societies fail to embody justice, when political rulers claim too much authority, and what a restored social order might look like if divine sovereignty were finally made effective within history. **The prophets provide the bridge between covenant and Kingdom:** they preserve the memory of failure, interpret catastrophe, challenge power, and keep alive the possibility that history might yet be transformed.



Chapter Four

The Kingdom in the Time of Jesus

By the beginning of the first century, Jewish society had inherited a history shaped by repeated encounters with larger political powers. Babylon had given way to Persia, Persia to the Hellenistic kingdoms, and the Hellenistic world had eventually been absorbed into the expanding power of Rome. Yet the sequence was more complicated than a simple succession of foreign rulers. Between these imperial periods came the Hasmonean revolt and a limited period of Jewish political independence, while throughout the centuries Jewish communities interacted with the surrounding cultures through trade, migration, administration, warfare, language, and intellectual exchange. The Jewish world into which Jesus was born was therefore not simply a people waiting passively under foreign domination. It was a society that had repeatedly adapted to, resisted, absorbed, and reinterpreted the civilizations around it.

This wider setting matters because the covenantal conception of God's reign did not develop independently of history. The traditions inherited from the Hebrew Scriptures had been formed through earlier experiences of monarchy, conquest, exile, and restoration, and those traditions were now being carried into a world transformed by Persian imperial administration, Greek language and culture, Jewish political independence, and Roman power. The fundamental question remained recognizable: if Israel's God was understood as the ultimate sovereign, what did that sovereignty mean when political authority was exercised by others? Yet the question had acquired new dimensions. It was no longer simply a matter of explaining why Israel had been defeated. It had become a question of how Jewish communities should live, worship, preserve their identity, and imagine the future while participating in a world whose political and cultural structures they could neither completely escape nor simply ignore.

Persia and the Incomplete Restoration

The Persian period had already demonstrated that political restoration and covenantal restoration were not necessarily the same thing. The Babylonian destruction was followed by the return of some Judean exiles and the rebuilding of the Temple, but the restoration of Jerusalem did not produce a restored Davidic kingdom. The Temple could be rebuilt while political sovereignty remained in Persian hands. Jewish identity could therefore survive without an independent monarchy, and covenantal life could continue even when political authority belonged to an empire. The restoration anticipated by the prophets remained, in important respects, incomplete. Jerusalem existed again, the Temple functioned again, and Jewish communal life continued, but the older political order had not simply been restored in its entirety.

This distinction would become increasingly important. The Temple had been rebuilt, but the Davidic monarchy had not returned, and Jerusalem was still governed by an imperial power. Jewish communal and religious life had been restored to some degree, but the larger political and social order imagined in the prophetic traditions had not simply reappeared. This left room for different understandings of what restoration meant. For some, it could mean the recovery of Jewish political independence; for others, a renewed covenantal relationship with God, greater justice within the community, or the eventual establishment of God's rule. These possibilities could overlap, but they were not identical. The experience of the Persian period therefore left Jewish communities with a question that had not been fully resolved: what would complete restoration actually look like?

Hellenism and Cultural Exchange

The arrival of the Hellenistic kingdoms introduced another transformation. Alexander's conquests brought much of the eastern Mediterranean and Near East into a political and cultural environment in which Greek language, education, artistic forms, administrative practices, and philosophical ideas circulated widely. Jewish communities did not respond to this environment in a single way. Some adopted elements of Greek culture; others resisted them; many participated selectively in the wider Hellenistic world while maintaining distinctive Jewish practices. Judaism did not encounter Hellenism as a simple contest between two sealed civilizations. Jewish society was itself part of the larger cultural environment, and the centuries that followed produced continual interaction between inherited Israelite traditions and the surrounding Hellenistic world.

That interaction should not be understood simply as a story of cultural contamination. Cross-cultural contact can produce borrowing, resistance, adaptation, and transformation simultaneously. Jewish writers could employ Greek language and literary forms while expressing distinctly Jewish ideas; Jewish communities could participate in Hellenistic cities while maintaining practices that distinguished them from their neighbors; and concepts circulating throughout the wider Mediterranean could be interpreted through Israel's own traditions. The historical importance of Hellenism therefore lies not merely in what Jews accepted from Greek culture but in the new environment in which Jewish identity itself had to be defined.

This is part of the larger historical pattern established in the opening chapters of this study. Israelite and Jewish thought did not develop in isolation. It repeatedly encountered surrounding civilizations and incorporated, rejected, modified, or reinterpreted elements of the wider world. By the first century, Jewish identity was therefore the product not of cultural isolation but of centuries of interaction.

The Hasmonean Experiment

The crisis under Antiochus IV in the second century BCE made these questions especially acute. The desecration of the Jerusalem Temple and the policies associated with Antiochus provoked the Maccabean revolt, which eventually produced a period of Jewish political independence under the Hasmonean dynasty. The significance of that revolt extended beyond resistance to a particular ruler. It demonstrated that covenantal identity could become the basis for political resistance and that defending Jewish religious practices could become inseparable from defending Jewish communal autonomy.

The victory created a new historical problem, however, because the Hasmoneans themselves combined religious and political authority in ways that generated controversy. A people that had resisted foreign domination in the name of covenant now possessed rulers who themselves had to be judged according to the standards of that covenant. The question of sovereignty could therefore no longer be reduced to a simple opposition between Jews and foreigners. It was also a question of what legitimate Jewish rule should look like. The covenantal tradition could be used to challenge foreign power, but it could also be used to criticize Jewish rulers who were believed to have violated its principles.

This development preserved the central tension identified in the previous chapter. Divine sovereignty could provide a basis for political resistance, but it could also place limits upon the authority of those who claimed to rule in God's name. Political independence did not automatically resolve the deeper question of what it meant for a society to live under God's reign.

Rome and the Political World of Jesus

Rome eventually transformed the situation again. In 63 BCE, Roman intervention in the Hasmonean civil conflict brought Judaea firmly into the Roman sphere, and Herod the Great subsequently ruled as a client king of Rome. Herod's reign illustrates the complexity of the world Jesus would inherit. Herod was deeply involved in Jewish political and religious life and undertook the monumental expansion of the Jerusalem Temple, yet his political authority depended upon Rome. Jewish society therefore encountered a form of rule in which local institutions, Jewish leadership, and imperial power were intertwined rather than neatly separated.

The Temple stood at the center of this arrangement. It was not simply a place of worship but a major institution of Jewish communal life, involving priestly authority, sacrifice, pilgrimage, economic activity, and political legitimacy. Its importance helps explain why disputes concerning the Temple could carry implications far beyond ritual practice. To challenge the Temple establishment could mean challenging an institution that stood at the intersection of religious authority, economic power, national identity, and the Jewish conception of God's presence among the people. The covenantal question therefore remained embedded within the institutions of everyday Jewish life: who had the authority to interpret God's law, who could legitimately administer the Temple, and whether those exercising authority were actually embodying the order they claimed to represent.

Roman rule added another layer to the problem. The empire exercised power through military force, taxation, local administration, client rulers, and a complex network of political relationships. For many Jews, accommodation with Rome could be understood as a practical necessity; for others, Roman sovereignty was an affront to the exclusive sovereignty of Israel's God. Between these positions existed numerous intermediate responses. Jewish society could neither be divided neatly into collaborators and rebels nor reduced to a single attitude toward Rome. Different individuals and communities could accommodate Roman rule in one area of life

while resisting it in another, and the same person could regard political survival as necessary without accepting Roman claims to ultimate authority.

This tension became particularly significant because Jewish monotheism placed a limit on the religious claims that could be made by earthly rulers. If ultimate allegiance belonged to God, then no emperor could simply occupy the position of God within the moral and religious imagination of Israel. Roman political authority could be recognized as a practical reality without necessarily being granted absolute legitimacy. The distinction between acknowledging political power and granting it ultimate allegiance would become increasingly important in the world of Jesus, where questions about taxation, loyalty, kingship, and the Kingdom of God could not be separated entirely from the wider question of who ultimately rules.

This is one of the places where the covenantal conception of God's reign acquires a distinctly political dimension without becoming reducible to political revolution. If God alone possesses ultimate sovereignty, then earthly power is necessarily relative. Kings, emperors, institutions, wealth, and social privilege may possess real authority, but none can legitimately claim the absolute allegiance that belongs to God. At the same time, allegiance to God does not automatically prescribe a single political strategy. The historical Jewish response to Rome demonstrates precisely this complexity.

A Diverse Jewish World

It is therefore important to resist the temptation to describe the Judaism of Jesus' time as a single unified system. The evidence instead points to a diverse Jewish landscape containing different approaches to Torah, Temple authority, purity, resurrection, political power, apocalyptic expectation, and the future of Israel. The Pharisees emphasized rigorous engagement with Torah and traditions of interpretation; the Sadducean priestly elite was closely connected with the Temple and the structures of Jerusalem's political establishment; communities associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls separated themselves from what they regarded as a corrupt religious order and anticipated divine judgment; and other groups and movements placed greater emphasis on resistance to foreign domination. These categories should not be treated as though they were modern denominations with fixed boundaries, but they nevertheless demonstrate that Jewish society contained competing visions of what covenantal faithfulness required.

The diversity becomes especially important when considering the Kingdom of God. It would be misleading to speak of a single standardized Jewish expectation in which everyone imagined the same future event. Some traditions emphasized restoration of Israel, some anticipated a Davidic ruler, some expected divine judgment upon the wicked, some emphasized purification of the Temple and community, and some anticipated a dramatic transformation of the world itself. Apocalyptic writings could imagine God directly overthrowing the powers responsible for injustice, while other forms of Jewish piety placed greater emphasis upon faithful Torah observance in the present. Revolutionary resistance could be interpreted by some as an expression of covenantal loyalty, while withdrawal from corrupt institutions could be understood by others as the more faithful response.

Yet beneath these differences lay a shared historical problem. The covenant had provided a framework for understanding God's sovereignty, and the prophets had repeatedly promised that this sovereignty would ultimately become effective within history. But history continued to be dominated by powers that were not Israel's God. The question was therefore no longer simply whether God's reign existed as a theological proposition. It was how and when that reign would

become visible in a world still characterized by foreign domination, social inequality, political violence, and religious disagreement.

This is the historical environment into which Jesus was born. It is also the environment in which John the Baptist becomes especially significant.

John the Baptist and the Renewal of Israel

The Gospels introduce John as a prophetic figure calling Israel to repentance in the wilderness and baptizing those who responded to his message. Josephus, writing independently of the Christian tradition, likewise describes John as a righteous teacher who urged moral renewal and administered baptism to those whose lives already reflected repentance. Although the two accounts differ considerably in emphasis, both indicate that John was a public figure whose activity attracted substantial attention. His movement therefore belongs within the larger Jewish world of covenant renewal and eschatological expectation rather than appearing as an isolated religious phenomenon.

The setting of John's activity is itself significant. By calling people to the Jordan rather than directing them toward the Temple in Jerusalem, John placed his movement within a symbolic landscape already saturated with Israel's history. The wilderness evoked the Exodus and the prophetic tradition, while the Jordan recalled Israel's entry into the promised land. His baptism could therefore be understood not merely as an individual act of religious purification but as a symbolic summons to collective preparation. Israel was being called to prepare for something. The precise nature of the expected event remains open to historical debate, but the symbolic structure of John's movement strongly suggests that he understood his activity as part of a larger moment of covenantal and eschatological significance.

John's message also helps clarify the relationship between repentance and the Kingdom. According to the Gospel tradition, he warned that judgment was near and called people to change their lives in preparation for what God was about to do. Repentance in this context was therefore not simply a private moral exercise. It belonged to a larger expectation that the existing order was approaching a decisive crisis. The prophetic pattern described in the previous chapter—covenant failure, judgment, and the possibility of renewal—was being reactivated within the first-century landscape.

Jesus Enters the Story

Jesus enters the historical record within this environment. The Gospel traditions place his baptism by John at the beginning of his public career, and even apart from the theological meanings later attached to the event, the association is historically significant because it situates Jesus within the same atmosphere of covenant renewal and eschatological expectation. Jesus did not emerge from nowhere with an entirely independent message. He entered a movement already concerned with repentance, restoration, judgment, and the approaching reign of God.

At the same time, the association between John and Jesus should not obscure the differences that would emerge between them. John remains closely identified with his prophetic call to repentance and his baptismal activity. Jesus, by contrast, is portrayed in the Gospel tradition as extending the proclamation of God's reign into the ordinary life of communities through teaching, healing, shared meals, forgiveness, hospitality, and the gathering of disciples. The historical significance of that development will be examined in the next chapter rather than assumed in advance here.

One point, however, is already clear. The Kingdom of God did not appear in first-century Judaism as an entirely new concept detached from everything that preceded it. Its language carried the accumulated weight of centuries of reflection on divine sovereignty, covenant, monarchy, injustice, foreign domination, exile, restoration, and the limits of human power. The Kingdom belonged to a historical conversation that was already underway.

Jesus' proclamation therefore needs to be understood within that conversation rather than outside it. The question is not simply why Jesus suddenly began speaking about the Kingdom of God. The more important historical question is what he meant by taking up a concept already embedded within Jewish tradition and making it the center of his own public proclamation.

That question leads directly to the next chapter. There we can move from the historical world Jesus inherited to his own words and actions and ask how his proclamation of the Kingdom relates to the covenantal tradition that had developed across the preceding centuries.



Chapter Five

Jesus and the Kingdom of God

When Jesus emerged from the ministry of John the Baptist, he did not begin by presenting a new philosophy or outlining a new theological system. According to the earliest Gospel tradition, his public ministry opened with a simple proclamation: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has drawn near. Repent, and believe the good news." These words are among the most familiar in the New Testament, yet they remain among the most debated. Their significance lies not simply in what Jesus said, but in what he assumed his hearers already understood.

Nothing in the Gospel accounts suggests that Jesus paused to define the expression "Kingdom of God." That silence is historically important. Had he intended to introduce an entirely new religious concept, some explanation would presumably have been necessary. Instead, he speaks as though the language already belongs to the shared vocabulary of Israel's Scriptures and the expectations of his contemporaries. The novelty of his message therefore does not necessarily lie in the idea of God's Kingdom itself, but in his announcement that its long-awaited realization had begun.

The central question, then, is how the Gospel tradition portrays Jesus' understanding of that realization. Throughout modern scholarship, discussion has often focused on chronology. Was the Kingdom entirely future, awaiting God's dramatic intervention at the end of history? Was it already present in Jesus' ministry? Or was it some combination of both? These questions have generated an enormous body of literature, but they are not the only questions that can be asked. They tell us when the Kingdom might appear, yet they tell us comparatively little about the nature of God's reign once it begins to appear within history.

If the argument developed in the previous chapters is correct, another possibility emerges. Jesus' proclamation can be understood not primarily as the announcement of a timetable but as the

announcement that God's covenantal reign is beginning to take visible form within history. The Kingdom is not detached from the covenant established at Sinai or from the prophetic hope of covenant renewal. It represents the historical manifestation of that same conception of divine reign, now becoming evident in a new and decisive way.

This perspective helps explain a striking feature of Jesus' ministry. He rarely speaks about the Kingdom in abstract terms. Instead, he demonstrates it through his teaching and actions. His parables portray what God's reign looks like; his actions embody it; and the communities that gather around him begin to live according to its principles. The Kingdom is proclaimed, but it is also embodied.

The Kingdom Made Visible

The practical expression of the Kingdom also helps explain one of the most distinctive features of Jesus' ministry. Unlike John the Baptist, whose movement remained closely identified with its founder, the Gospel tradition portrays Jesus entrusting the proclamation of the Kingdom to others. He repeatedly sends his disciples into surrounding villages to proclaim that the Kingdom of God has drawn near, to heal the sick, to receive hospitality, and to share meals with those who welcome them. They are not simply instructed to gather converts or direct people back to Jesus. They are commissioned to reproduce practices associated with the Kingdom itself.

This missionary pattern deserves careful attention because it represents more than a strategy for expanding the movement. It reveals something about how the Gospel tradition portrays the Kingdom itself. The reign of God is not confined to Jesus' physical presence or personality. It becomes visible wherever communities begin to embody the covenantal life he proclaims. The disciples are therefore sent not merely as messengers but as participants in that reality, extending into new villages the same practices of healing, reconciliation, fellowship, hospitality, and mutual dependence that characterize Jesus' ministry.

The instructions accompanying this mission are equally significant. The disciples are told to travel without provisions, carrying neither extra supplies nor the means of independent support. Instead, they are to depend upon the hospitality of those who receive them, healing the sick and sharing their meals in return. This reciprocal relationship transforms ordinary acts of hospitality into visible expressions of communal life. The Kingdom is enacted not only through proclamation but through communities practicing generosity, trust, compassion, and shared responsibility toward one another.

The centrality of healing and shared meals is especially revealing. Throughout the Gospels, these are not incidental features of Jesus' ministry, but recurring signs associated with the arrival of God's reign. Healing restores persons to the fullness of communal life, while shared meals visibly dissolve boundaries that had long divided society. Both can be understood within the covenant's twin obligations of wholehearted devotion to God and faithful responsibility toward one's neighbor. The Kingdom is therefore not presented simply as an abstract doctrine awaiting future fulfillment, but as a pattern of life already taking shape wherever the covenantal order is being embodied.

Dominic Crossan has suggested that this decentralized missionary strategy may also reflect an important historical lesson drawn from the fate of John the Baptist. John's movement remained closely identified with its founder, making it especially vulnerable once Herod Antipas imprisoned and executed him. Jesus' movement, by contrast, appears to have developed a

different structure. Rather than concentrating the proclamation of the Kingdom in his own person, he repeatedly commissioned his disciples to proclaim the Kingdom, heal the sick, and establish communities that embodied its values. Crossan describes this transformation as a movement from a charismatic "monopoly" to a reproducible "franchise." Whether Jesus consciously designed his mission in response to John's execution cannot be established with certainty, but the comparison offers a historically plausible explanation for why the Kingdom spread through a growing network of disciples rather than remaining centered upon Jesus alone.

In this respect, **the movement itself becomes part of the message.** The Kingdom continues to be proclaimed because its visible practices can be reproduced by others. By sending his disciples without provisions or independent means of support, and instructing them to heal, receive hospitality, and share meals, Jesus distributes the visible work of the Kingdom across a network of communities. Whether this was a deliberate response to John's fate cannot be demonstrated, but the historical pattern is striking: the proclamation is externalized through the actions of others rather than made entirely dependent upon the continued presence of a single public figure.

Seen in this light, the mission of the disciples represents more than the expansion of Jesus' influence. It provides an early historical expression of the Kingdom as a community. The Kingdom is not merely announced; it is made visible through healing, hospitality, shared meals, reconciliation, and mutual service. Wherever these practices take root, the covenant begins to assume visible social form, and the reign of God becomes tangible within human relationships.

Jesus and the Covenant

The Sermon on the Mount provides another clear example. Rather than simply abolishing the Torah, Jesus repeatedly deepens its demands. Murder is traced back to anger, adultery to the intentions of the heart, retaliation gives way to reconciliation, and love extends even to enemies. These teachings are sometimes described as a new ethic, but within the framework developed throughout this study they can instead be understood as an intensified expression of the covenant's ethical purpose. Jesus is not portrayed as replacing the covenant with an unrelated system; he calls his hearers to embody its demands more completely.

The Beatitudes point in the same direction. The poor in spirit, the merciful, the peacemakers, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are not arbitrary categories of blessedness. Together they describe the character of a people living under God's reign. The Kingdom belongs to them not because they possess political power or religious status, but because their lives reflect the values associated with covenantal faithfulness.

The same pattern appears throughout Jesus' parables. Although the imagery varies—from seeds and harvests to vineyards, banquets, and lost sons—the Kingdom is consistently presented as God's active work within history. It grows, transforms, gathers, restores, and judges. It cannot be reduced to political revolution, inward spiritual experience, or a distant future event alone. It is the dynamic expression of God's rule as His purposes begin to reshape human lives and communities.

Jesus' miracles should be considered within the same framework, while recognizing the historical uncertainty surrounding individual miracle accounts. Modern scholarship has variously understood these stories as supernatural demonstrations of divine authority, symbolic narratives, or traditions that developed within the early movement. There is also another possibility: that some of these traditions preserve experiences of Jesus' extraordinary personal presence and its

effect upon the people around him. Jesus may have possessed the kind of charisma through which people felt seen, restored, forgiven, or newly capable of living, particularly in a culture where healing and human suffering were understood through a religious framework. What we might describe today in terms of psychological influence, emotional release, confidence, social reintegration, or the powerful presence of a charismatic individual could, in the world of Jesus, be experienced as an encounter with the transcendent. In this sense, the language of an “energy field” need not imply a scientifically measurable force surrounding Jesus; it can serve more modestly as a way of describing the extraordinary human presence that others may have experienced in his company. Bishop Spong's formulation captures this possibility by suggesting that Jesus' humanity and consciousness were experienced as so whole that what people understood as the presence of God could “flow through him.” Whether or not one accepts Spong's theological interpretation, the underlying historical possibility is worth considering: **Jesus may have affected people so deeply that experiences of personal and communal transformation were remembered as encounters with divine power.**

Whatever the historical explanation for individual accounts, the Gospel tradition consistently presents these actions as signs of God's reign. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, lepers are restored, the hungry are fed, and those excluded from society are welcomed back into community. Disorder gives way to restoration. The pattern recalls the prophetic vision of a world renewed under God's rule. The miracles therefore function within the Gospel narrative not simply as demonstrations of supernatural power but as visible experiences of restoration—anticipations of the Kingdom Jesus proclaims.

Love of God and Love of Neighbor

Perhaps nowhere is the relationship between covenant and Kingdom summarized more clearly than in Jesus' response to the scribe who asks about the greatest commandment. Rather than selecting a single law, Jesus joins together these two foundational commandments, affirming wholehearted love for God and love for one's neighbor as the foundation upon which “all the Law and the Prophets” depend. This response is significant because it affirms the continuing authority of Israel's Scriptures, identifies what Jesus presents as the deepest principles of covenantal life, and places those principles at the center of his own teaching.

One further historical observation deserves particular attention. When Jesus summarizes the Law by commanding wholehearted love for “the Lord your God,” the Gospel tradition presents him as a Jewish teacher addressing fellow Jews within Israel's covenantal tradition. His words direct his hearers toward the God of Israel revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures *rather than toward himself*. That distinction is historically important. How later Christian theology came to understand Jesus' identity is a separate historical and theological question that lies beyond the scope of this study. The present investigation is concerned with reconstructing Jesus' own proclamation within the religious world of first-century Judaism.

The conversation does not end there. After the scribe acknowledges the wisdom of Jesus' answer, Jesus responds with an observation that deserves far more attention than it often receives: “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” The statement is remarkable because proximity to the Kingdom is not measured by political allegiance, social status, or even detailed legal expertise. It is associated with recognizing that love of God and love of neighbor stand at the center of the Law. Within the Gospel tradition, understanding the covenant's fundamental obligations places a person “near” the Kingdom itself.

This passage forms a crucial bridge between the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus' proclamation. The covenant traditions associated with Sinai had called Israel into wholehearted loyalty to God expressed through justice, mercy, and responsibility within the community. The prophets repeatedly recalled the nation to those commitments. Jesus now gathers these themes into a single interpretive framework and announces that God's long-awaited reign is becoming a present reality among those who embrace them.

The structure of these two commandments also reveals a deeper pattern within the covenantal conception of the Kingdom. Love of God establishes the **vertical axis** of allegiance: ultimate loyalty belongs to God and cannot finally be transferred to any human ruler, institution, ideology, possession, or political power. Love of neighbor establishes the **horizontal axis** through which that allegiance becomes socially visible. The two commandments therefore cannot be separated without distorting the conception of covenantal life represented in Jesus' teaching.

A person may claim devotion to God while neglecting the human beings whose welfare the covenant requires. Conversely, a program of social concern can lose its covenantal foundation if it has no higher standard by which power, self-interest, and competing claims can be judged. The Kingdom becomes visible precisely where these two dimensions meet: faithful devotion directed upward toward God and faithful responsibility extended outward toward one's neighbor.

God, Conscience, and Human Authority

This distinction also establishes an important principle of personal freedom. If ultimate allegiance belongs to God rather than to kings, emperors, the state, ideology, wealth, or any other earthly power, then no human authority can legitimately claim absolute ownership of the individual conscience. This does not mean that Jesus was advocating modern political liberty in the contemporary sense, nor does it remove the obligations owed to legitimate human authorities. It means instead that every earthly authority remains subordinate to a higher allegiance.

Within the covenantal logic developed throughout this study, freedom therefore begins not with the absence of obligation but with the refusal to treat any human power as ultimate. The person whose ultimate allegiance belongs to God cannot be completely possessed by the political or social order in which he or she lives. This principle helps explain why the covenantal conception of God's reign could simultaneously provide a basis for communal responsibility and a limit upon human claims to absolute authority.

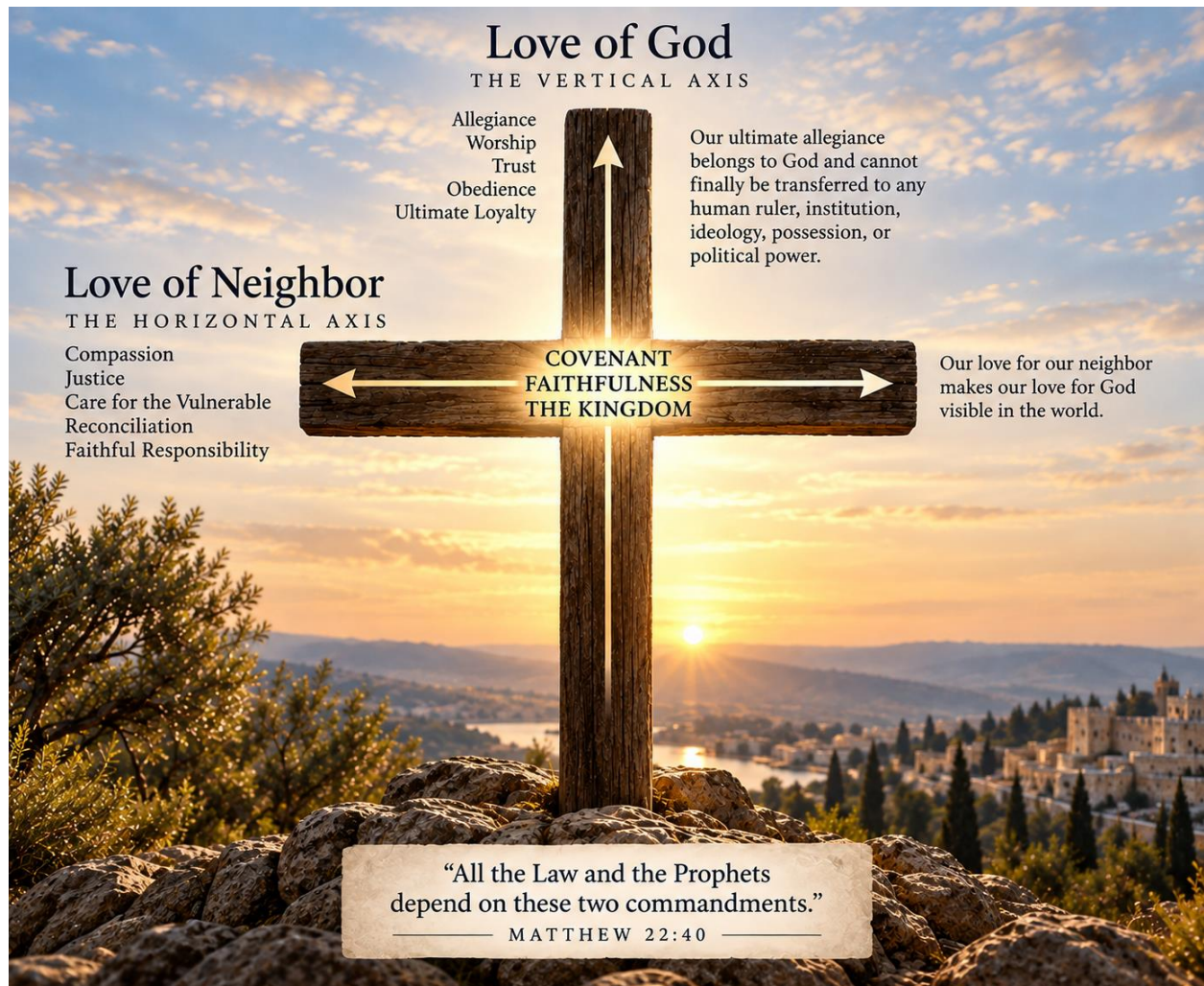
The Kingdom and the Will of God

The Lord's Prayer reinforces the same conclusion. "Your Kingdom come" is immediately followed by "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." These petitions are not separate ideas placed beside one another. They explain one another. God's Kingdom comes as His will is done. The prayer therefore defines the Kingdom not primarily by geography or chronology but by the realization of God's purposes within human life.

This does not eliminate the future dimension of Jesus' proclamation. The Kingdom can be understood as both present and future without requiring those dimensions to contradict one another. If God's reign is becoming visible through practices that embody its principles, it can already be present in a partial and historical sense while remaining incomplete as a transformation of the whole world. The distinction between present and future therefore need not be treated as an either-or proposition.

Carrying the Cross

The same two dimensions help illuminate Jesus' later language about taking up one's cross. Historically, the image belongs to the summons to faithful discipleship in the face of suffering, opposition, and the consequences of refusing to abandon one's allegiance. Yet within the covenantal framework developed here, it also provides a powerful image of the relationship between the two commandments.



The Kingdom becomes visible precisely where these two dimensions meet: faithful devotion directed upward toward God and faithful responsibility extended outward toward one's neighbor.

The **vertical beam** can represent the person's ultimate allegiance to God, while the **horizontal beam** represents the obligation to live that allegiance through love of neighbor. To carry one's cross is therefore not simply to endure suffering. It can also serve as a lasting image of the tension inherent in covenantal life: holding devotion to God and responsibility toward other human beings together when the surrounding world pressures the individual to sacrifice one for the other.

Ultimate loyalty to God can demand resistance to earthly claims upon the conscience, while love of neighbor prevents that freedom from becoming mere individual self-interest. The Kingdom requires both.

The Kingdom as Covenant Made Visible

Seen in this light, Jesus' proclamation displays a remarkable coherence. His teaching, his healings, his parables, his meals with those on the margins of society, his interpretation of the Law, and his commissioning of disciples all point toward the same underlying reality. The Kingdom is the manifestation of God's reign wherever the principles of covenantal life are embraced and embodied.

It is already present because God's rule is becoming visible through the practices associated with Jesus' ministry, yet it remains future because that reign has not transformed the whole of creation. The tension between present and future, so often emphasized in modern scholarship, need not be understood as a contradiction. It can instead be understood as reflecting the unfolding character of a historical process: the reign of God is announced as near, embodied in particular practices and communities, and nevertheless awaited in its fullness.

This understanding also helps explain why Jesus' ministry could provoke such different responses. Those who expected God's reign to appear through military victory or political revolution could find his methods perplexing. Those who reduced covenant faithfulness to external observance could find his demands uncomfortably searching. Those who benefited from systems of exclusion and privilege could find themselves confronted by a vision of God's Kingdom in which mercy, justice, reconciliation, and communal responsibility occupied the center.

Jesus' proclamation, as reconstructed through the Gospel tradition, therefore does not require the introduction of a different God or an entirely different covenantal order. It can be understood as a **summons for Israel to become the people the covenant had always called it to be**, while announcing that God's long-awaited reign was now beginning to become historically visible.

That claim brings the study to its final question. If the Kingdom is indeed best understood as the historical realization of God's covenantal reign, how did the movement that continued after Jesus' death understand that proclamation? Did his earliest followers preserve the basic structure of his message, or did they reinterpret it in fundamentally different ways?

That question brings us to the final stage of the historical investigation.



Chapter Six

The Kingdom After Jesus: Continuity and Development

The death of Jesus confronted his followers with a crisis that appeared to undermine everything they had hoped for. The one who had proclaimed that the Kingdom of God had drawn near had been executed by Roman authority after a confrontation in Jerusalem that brought him into conflict with elements of the Temple and political establishment. Whatever expectations had surrounded his ministry now stood in apparent contradiction to the reality of the cross. From every outward perspective, the announcement of God's reign seemed to have ended in failure.

Yet within a remarkably short period, the movement not only survived but expanded. Its earliest proclamation did not abandon Jesus' message; it announced with renewed confidence that God's purposes had continued through the resurrection. It is important to remember, however, that resurrection was not a uniquely Christian idea. Within the diverse Jewish world of the first century, some traditions already expected a future resurrection of the dead as part of God's final restoration, while other Jewish groups rejected the idea. The concept therefore did not initially carry all of the elaborate theological and cosmic meanings that later Christian tradition would attach to the resurrection of Jesus. What matters here is what happened to the Kingdom Jesus had proclaimed after his death.

The evidence preserved in the New Testament consistently suggests that the earliest followers of Jesus did not believe they were founding a new religion detached from Israel's past. They understood themselves as participants in the continuation of Israel's story. The Scriptures of Israel remained their Scriptures. The God they proclaimed was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The covenant had not been discarded; rather, they believed that it had reached a decisive moment through the events surrounding Jesus.

This continuity is evident in the speeches attributed to Peter in Acts. He interprets the events surrounding Jesus through Israel's Scriptures, referring to David, the prophets, Moses, and the promises made to Israel. In Acts 2, for example, Peter interprets Jesus' resurrection through a psalm attributed to David and connects Jesus with God's promises to David. In Acts 3, he describes Jesus in relation to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and connects the events surrounding him with the promises spoken through the prophets. The speeches therefore present Jesus not as the beginning of a religious story unrelated to Israel, but as part of the continuing story of Israel, with his followers interpreting the events surrounding him as the fulfillment of promises contained within that story.

The Jerusalem community itself continued to live as a Jewish movement. In Acts, its members are portrayed as worshipping in the Temple and continuing to observe Jewish patterns of life, while interpreting their faith through Israel's Scriptures and traditions. The earliest followers did not imagine themselves as having stepped outside that story. They understood themselves as participants in its anticipated renewal. The movement therefore continued to understand the events surrounding Jesus within the larger story of Israel and its covenant with God

James and the Covenant Made Social

James, the brother of Jesus and a leading figure within the Jerusalem movement, provides an especially important window into this continuity. His letter contains relatively little abstract theology and instead emphasizes the practical responsibilities of communal life: care for the poor, integrity in speech, impartial justice, humility, patience, and faithful action. These concerns are unmistakably reminiscent of both the prophetic tradition and the teaching attributed to Jesus. Faith is never separated from the life it produces. Genuine allegiance to God becomes visible through the character of the community itself.

James therefore provides an important counterweight to any interpretation that understands the earliest movement primarily as a departure from Jewish covenantal life. His emphasis falls not upon abandoning Torah but upon demonstrating allegiance to God through justice, mercy, restraint, care for the vulnerable, and integrity in communal relationships. In this respect, his teaching stands remarkably close to the prophetic tradition described earlier in this study. The covenant is meaningful because it produces a particular kind of community, and God's reign becomes visible when that community actually embodies the obligations it claims to recognize.

The same two dimensions of covenantal life remain visible in this earliest movement. Loyalty to God establishes the **vertical axis** of allegiance, while responsibility toward other human beings establishes the **horizontal axis** through which that allegiance becomes socially visible. Care for widows and the poor, sharing of resources, rejection of favoritism, and the insistence that faith must produce action all belong to the horizontal expression of a loyalty directed ultimately toward God. The Kingdom therefore does not disappear with Jesus' death. Within the evidence preserved in these traditions, it continues wherever devotion to God and responsibility toward neighbor are embodied together in communal life.

This continuity is particularly significant because it gives us a historical test of the interpretation proposed in Chapter Five. If Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom had represented a fundamentally individualistic or purely spiritual idea, we might expect the earliest movement to have moved away from the concrete social obligations emphasized by the covenantal and prophetic traditions. Instead, the surviving evidence repeatedly associates allegiance to God with

the treatment of other human beings. The Kingdom remains visible through the life of the early Jewish community that gathered around Jesus' message.

Paul and the Transformation of the Covenant

That continuity, however, would soon be tested by the movement's expansion beyond its original Jewish setting. As the message about Jesus spread beyond the communities in which it had first developed, questions arose about whether people who were not Jewish could participate in the promises associated with Israel without adopting the full range of Jewish covenantal practices. It is at this point that Paul becomes especially important. His letters provide our earliest substantial Christian writings and show how the movement was beginning to work through these questions in communities that included both Jews and non-Jews.

Paul took the movement in a new direction. His mission to Gentiles brought questions to the center of the movement that had not occupied the same position within Jesus' primarily Galilean ministry: Could non-Jews become members of God's people without becoming Jews? Was circumcision necessary? What role did Torah observance continue to play? And, more fundamentally, could participation in the covenantal promises be separated from the covenantal practices through which Jewish identity had historically been expressed?

Paul's answer was consequential. Gentiles did not need to adopt the full Jewish way of life in order to participate in God's promises. Circumcision, food regulations, and other markers of Jewish covenantal identity could no longer function as prerequisites for membership in the renewed people of God. In Paul's argument, faith in Christ became the decisive basis for participation. The shift was not merely administrative. It altered the social structure through which covenant identity had traditionally been expressed.

This is particularly clear in Paul's argument concerning faith and "works of the law." Paul repeatedly insists that people are justified through faith rather than through works of the law, especially in his arguments concerning Gentile inclusion. Whatever the precise meaning of "works of the law" in each Pauline context, the practical effect of his argument is unmistakable: Gentiles do not need to enter the covenant community by adopting the distinctive practices that historically marked Jewish covenantal identity. **Faith in Christ becomes the decisive boundary marker.**

That position places Paul at a significant distance from the covenantal framework reconstructed earlier in this study. The covenant was not merely a set of beliefs about God. It was a lived communal order expressed through obedience, justice, mercy, ritual practice, responsibility toward one's neighbor, and the formation of a particular people. Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom, as reconstructed here, intensifies that covenantal life rather than dissolving it. Paul, by contrast, increasingly relocates participation in God's people around faith in Christ rather than conformity to the Torah-centered practices that had defined Jewish communal identity.

Paul's treatment of the covenant itself is equally significant. In some passages he does not simply describe the Gentile mission as an addition to an unchanged covenantal order. He contrasts the covenant associated with the written law with a new mode of participation associated with Christ and the Spirit. In 2 Corinthians, for example, Paul describes himself as a minister of a "new covenant," contrasting the written code with the life-giving work of the Spirit. In Galatians, his argument goes further: the law is described as having served a temporary function within salvation history, while faith in Christ marks the arrival of a new stage in God's purposes. The

result is not necessarily a simple declaration that Israel's Scriptures have become meaningless, but it does represent a profound reconfiguration of how covenant membership and divine promise are understood.

The contrast becomes sharper when Paul's message is compared with the Kingdom proclamation attributed to Jesus. Jesus' teaching repeatedly directs attention toward the God of Israel, the commandments, love of God and neighbor, mercy, justice, forgiveness, communal responsibility, and the practical embodiment of God's reign. Paul increasingly directs the center of proclamation toward the person and significance of Christ himself. The Kingdom does not disappear from the larger Christian tradition, but the organizing principle begins to change. What Jesus proclaimed as God's reign becomes increasingly interpreted through the death and resurrection of Jesus and through participation in Christ.

This development is historically consequential because it changes the question being asked. Jesus' proclamation can be reconstructed as asking what it means for human beings and communities to live under the sovereignty of God. Paul's proclamation increasingly asks what God's act in Christ means for humanity and how human beings enter the new reality created through Christ. The two are related, but they are not identical.

From God's Reign to God's Act in Christ

Paul's Christology therefore deserves to be treated not simply as a continuation of Jesus' message but as one of the most consequential developments in the movement's history. The historical Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God; Paul proclaimed Christ crucified and risen as the decisive means through which God's purposes were now understood. The distinction matters. A movement originally organized around the announcement that God's reign was becoming visible within human life could, through Paul's interpretation, become increasingly organized around belief concerning the person and salvific significance of Jesus.

This transformation also helps explain why Paul's letters can simultaneously preserve elements of Jesus' ethical teaching while relocating those teachings within a fundamentally different theological structure. Love, generosity, care for others, and communal responsibility remain important. Yet they are no longer necessarily the primary evidence through which the Kingdom itself is recognized. They become aspects of life "in Christ," subordinate to a larger theological framework centered upon Christ's death, resurrection, justification, faith, and the Spirit.

The Gentile mission therefore produced more than geographical expansion. It generated a struggle over what the movement actually was. Was it a renewed Jewish movement announcing and embodying God's covenantal reign, or was it becoming a new trans-ethnic community whose defining identity rested upon faith in Christ rather than participation in Jewish covenantal practice? The surviving sources suggest that both trajectories existed, and the tension between them was never merely theoretical.

The Jerusalem community associated with James continued to represent a strongly Jewish form of the movement, while Paul's communities increasingly crossed ethnic and cultural boundaries. The disagreement was therefore not simply about missionary strategy. It concerned the meaning of covenant itself, the continuing significance of Torah, the basis of membership in God's people, and ultimately the place of Jesus within the message.

Paul's achievement was enormous. He helped transform a Jewish movement rooted in Galilee and Jerusalem into a rapidly expanding trans-ethnic network capable of crossing the boundaries

of the Jewish world. But that achievement came at a theological and conceptual price. The further the movement traveled from its original covenantal environment, the more its identity could be detached from the concrete Jewish practices through which covenant had historically been lived. And the more central Christ became to the movement's identity, the more the proclamation of God's Kingdom could be subordinated to a developing Christology.

For that reason, Paul's role should not be described simply as the "expansion of the covenant." He represents a transformation of the covenantal message and a major re-centering of the movement around Christ. Whether that transformation should be understood as the legitimate fulfillment of Jesus' proclamation, a necessary adaptation to the Gentile world, or a departure from the original Kingdom message is a question that the historical evidence cannot settle by theological assertion. But the transformation itself should not be minimized.

The distinction is essential to the argument of this study. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God. Paul increasingly proclaimed what God had accomplished through Christ. The two traditions remained connected through Israel's Scriptures, covenantal language, and the expectation of divine action, but the center of gravity had shifted. What began as a proclamation concerning the reign of God could increasingly become a proclamation concerning the person of the one believed to embody, mediate, and ultimately define that reign.

The Kingdom After Jesus

From the perspective of this study, the continuity is historically significant. The earliest Jesus movement, particularly the community associated with Jerusalem, does not appear to have understood itself as replacing the covenant with an entirely different religious order. Rather, its members believed that God's covenantal purposes had entered a decisive stage through the events surrounding Jesus. Whether one accepts that conviction as a theological truth is a separate question. Historically, however, the earliest evidence indicates that Jesus' followers in Jerusalem understood themselves as living within the continuing story of God's reign rather than beginning an unrelated religious movement.

This early Jerusalem movement should not, however, be treated as identical with the later Gentile mission associated with Paul. Paul's mission emerged from the same Jesus movement but confronted questions that became far more significant as non-Jews entered the community: whether Gentiles could participate in God's covenant without adopting Jewish identity markers such as circumcision and Torah observance. The distinction matters because the history that follows is not simply one of uninterrupted continuity. It is a history of continuity accompanied by significant rift within the larger movement itself.

The evidence also suggests that the Kingdom did not disappear when Jesus died. If anything, the survival of the Jerusalem community demonstrates one of the most important characteristics of the Kingdom as reconstructed in this study: it was capable of being embodied by a community rather than remaining dependent upon the physical presence of its founder. The practices associated with Jesus—care for the vulnerable, shared resources, hospitality, communal responsibility, reconciliation, and fidelity to God—could continue after his death because they had been translated into a social pattern.

The Jerusalem movement did not simply disappear after the first Jewish war. Ancient Christian traditions report that members of the Jerusalem community relocated to Pella before the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE, preserving a Jewish form of the Jesus movement outside the

destroyed city. The later history of these Jewish followers is difficult to reconstruct, but groups identified by later writers as Jewish Christians continued to exist in Palestine and Syria. Among them were communities known as the Ebionites, who maintained Jewish practices and rejected Paul's approach to the law. It would be too strong, however, to treat the Ebionites as a direct institutional continuation of the original Jerusalem community. The surviving evidence is too fragmentary to establish such a continuous line. What can be said is that Jewish forms of the Jesus movement survived for generations even as the expanding Gentile Christian movement increasingly became the dominant expression of Christianity.

The earliest movement therefore offers an important historical continuation of the argument developed throughout this study. The Kingdom is not simply an idea about the future, nor is it merely an inward spiritual state. It is a conception of divine sovereignty that becomes historically meaningful when the principles associated with that sovereignty are embodied in human relationships.

The history of the earliest movement also raises a question that cannot be left behind. If the covenantal and communal dimensions of the Kingdom became increasingly transformed as the movement expanded, what might be recovered by returning to the historical conception of the Kingdom examined in this study?

The teachings attributed to Jesus, the practices associated with the early Jerusalem community, and the ethical traditions preserved in the writings of James and Paul did not simply disappear, even as their meanings were reshaped. They provide evidence for a continuing conception of divine rule in which allegiance to God was inseparable from the way human beings treated one another.

Returning to the Central Question

This observation brings us back to the question with which the study began. If covenant consistently provides the framework through which Israelite tradition understands divine sovereignty; if the prophetic tradition repeatedly connects that sovereignty with justice, restoration, communal responsibility, and the renewal of human life; and if Jesus' proclamation and the earliest movement that followed him can be understood as announcing the historical realization of those expectations, then the relationship between covenant and Kingdom deserves to be reconsidered.

The evidence does not require us to assume the theological truth of the claims made by these traditions in order to recognize their historical continuity. What it allows us to examine is whether Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom makes better historical sense when understood as the continuation and transformation of a much older covenantal conception of divine rule rather than as the introduction of an entirely new religious idea.

The answer cannot rest upon one passage or one historical claim. It depends upon the cumulative pattern developed throughout the study: the ancient Near Eastern background in which Israelite concepts of sovereignty emerged; the development of covenant as a framework for communal obligation; the prophetic transformation of covenant into a critique of political and social power; the persistence of those questions through Persian, Hellenistic, Hasmonean, and Roman rule; John's call to renewal within that historical environment; Jesus' proclamation that the Kingdom had drawn near; his embodiment of covenantal principles through teaching and practice; and the continuation of those principles within the earliest communities after his death.

Taken together, these patterns provide the basis for the proposal advanced here. The Kingdom of God can be understood historically as the realization of a covenantal conception of divine sovereignty—a conception in which ultimate allegiance belongs to God, while that allegiance becomes visible through justice, mercy, responsibility, and faithful treatment of one's neighbor.

That interpretation does not eliminate the apocalyptic dimension of Jesus' proclamation, nor does it require us to deny the expectation of a future transformation of the world. Instead, it places the future expectation within a larger framework. The Kingdom can be both anticipated and embodied, future and partially present, because the historical realization of God's reign can begin before its imagined completion.

The study can now turn to its final assessment. The concluding chapter will examine the central proposal directly: whether the covenantal reading provides a coherent historical explanation of Jesus' Kingdom proclamation, what evidence most strongly supports or challenges that interpretation, and what conclusions can reasonably be drawn from the historical reconstruction developed across the study.



Conclusion

The Kingdom and the Covenantal Reign of God

This study began with a question that has received surprisingly little direct attention within historical Jesus research. Much of the modern discussion surrounding the Kingdom of God has concentrated on its timing, its location, or its relationship to apocalyptic expectation, political transformation, or personal spirituality. These discussions have generated important insights, yet they often assume rather than investigate the more fundamental issue of how God's kingship itself was understood. Before asking when the Kingdom comes, we must first ask by what principles God's reign was understood to operate within the traditions Jesus inherited.

The evidence examined throughout this study suggests a remarkably consistent pattern within the biblical literature. From the opening chapters of Genesis onward, the biblical writers portray God's sovereignty not merely through displays of absolute power but through the establishment of an ordered world reflecting divine purposes. Human beings are presented as participants in that order, exercising delegated authority rather than autonomous rule. When that order is disrupted through human rebellion, the biblical narrative repeatedly turns toward judgment, restoration, and renewal. The story that emerges is therefore one in which divine sovereignty is repeatedly interpreted through the relationship between human conduct and the order attributed to God.

The covenant becomes one of the principal historical and literary frameworks through which that relationship is expressed. Beginning with the patriarchal traditions and reaching its defining expression at Sinai, the biblical literature presents covenant as the framework through which God's authority is understood in relation to a particular people. It shapes worship, justice, communal responsibility, and the ethical character expected of Israel. The prophets repeatedly return to this covenant, not because they seek a different foundation for God's reign, but because

they argue that Israel has failed to live according to the order its own traditions attribute to God. Their visions of the future therefore frequently take the form of covenant renewal: hearts transformed, justice restored, relationships repaired, and divine sovereignty acknowledged more fully within human society.

The historical importance of this development becomes clearer when the covenant is considered alongside the institutions through which Israelite tradition understood God's presence. Israel rejected the use of a physical image to represent YHWH, yet the Temple became the principal institutional and symbolic location associated with God's presence. The prophets repeatedly challenged the idea that the Temple, religious ritual, or Israel's special status could guarantee God's favor. Their criticism points to an important distinction: **representing God's presence is not the same as embodying God's rule.**

The Temple could symbolize divine sovereignty, but its existence did not guarantee that the society surrounding it actually lived according to the justice, mercy, and faithfulness demanded by the covenant. Israel could possess the institutions associated with God's rule while failing to live under the order those institutions represented.

This tension helps explain why the question of God's Kingdom becomes so important. The issue is not simply whether Israel believed that God was King. It is whether God's rule was actually being realized in the life of the community. The recurring gap between the order Israel claimed to represent and the way its society actually functioned created a problem that covenantal institutions alone could not resolve. The Kingdom question therefore emerges from the expectation that God's sovereignty must eventually become more than a claim, a symbol, or an institution: it must become a lived reality.

Seen against this background, Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom appears in a different light. He does not announce the arrival of an unfamiliar idea, nor does he present himself as replacing Israel's Scriptures with a new religious system. His language assumes the biblical and Jewish traditions that precede him. What distinguishes his proclamation is the conviction, as preserved in the Gospel tradition, that the reign toward which these traditions had looked was now beginning to become visible within history.

This interpretation helps explain several features of Jesus' ministry that are often treated separately. His announcement that the Kingdom has drawn near, his summary of the Law in the twin commandments of love for God and love for neighbor, his parables, his healings, his meals with social outsiders, his sending of disciples, and his vision of a transformed community all point toward the same reality. They are not disconnected elements of his ministry but different expressions of a single proclamation. God's reign becomes historically visible wherever the covenantal purposes attributed to God are embodied in human relationships and communal life.

The Kingdom: From Expectation to Human Action

The contrast between John the Baptist and Jesus becomes especially significant when the two proclamations are considered together. John stood within the prophetic tradition of imminent judgment and divine intervention. His baptism called Israel to repentance in preparation for an act that God was expected to bring about. The responsibility of the people was therefore to prepare themselves for the transformation that was approaching.

Jesus inherited this expectation of God's reign, but his proclamation placed an unusually strong emphasis on what human beings were to do with one another in the present. The Kingdom was

not simply something to await. Its anticipated order was to be expressed through human conduct: forgiveness rather than retaliation, reconciliation rather than division, generosity rather than accumulation, service rather than domination, and concern for those whose position left them vulnerable. The Kingdom could therefore be proclaimed as God's coming reign while its values were practiced within human relationships before that reign was fully realized.

This does not require the conclusion that Jesus rejected the expectation of divine intervention. His proclamation remained rooted in the apocalyptic and covenantal world of first-century Judaism. The historical significance lies elsewhere. Where expectation could encourage people to await God's decisive action, Jesus' teaching repeatedly directed attention toward conduct that human beings could undertake immediately. The transformation of society was not left entirely in the realm of an anticipated divine event. It began, at least in part, in the relationships people created with one another.

This provides an important context for the two commandments Jesus places at the center of covenantal life. Love of God establishes the ultimate allegiance of the community; love of neighbor establishes the responsibility of its members toward one another. The first identifies the authority under which life is ordered. The second identifies the human relationships through which that order becomes visible. Together they turn the expectation of God's reign toward a question of human practice: how should people live with one another while awaiting, anticipating, or embodying the Kingdom?

The significance of this development reaches beyond the immediate religious setting. A community does not become transformed merely because its members believe that a different order is coming. It changes when its members begin to conduct their relationships according to the principles of that order. In this sense, Jesus' proclamation introduces a possibility that extends beyond the apocalyptic expectation from which it emerged: human beings need not simply wait for a transformed world; they can begin to transform the relationships through which their world is created.

The distinction between love of God and love of neighbor also provides one of the clearest ways to understand the structure of that Kingdom. Love of God establishes the **vertical axis** of ultimate allegiance. Within the Jewish tradition Jesus inherited, that allegiance belongs to God rather than to any human ruler, institution, possession, or political power. Love of neighbor establishes the **horizontal axis** through which that allegiance becomes socially visible. The two cannot finally be separated. Devotion to God without responsibility toward one's neighbor contradicts the covenantal order Jesus invokes, while concern for one's neighbor without any higher standard of allegiance leaves social relationships vulnerable to the same competing claims of power and self-interest that the Kingdom relativizes. The Kingdom is therefore not simply an inward experience or a future political arrangement. It becomes visible where devotion to God and responsibility toward other human beings meet.

This framework also clarifies the significance of Jesus' mission beyond his own person. The Gospel tradition portrays him sending his disciples into surrounding communities to proclaim the Kingdom, heal the sick, receive hospitality, and share meals with those who welcomed them. The Kingdom was therefore not made dependent upon the continued physical presence of its founder. In light of the fate of John the Baptist, Jesus may have deliberately decentralized the movement offers a historically plausible interpretation of this pattern, although the evidence cannot establish his precise intention with certainty. What can be observed is that the Kingdom

was externalized through the actions of a community. Its proclamation and practices could continue even when the individual who first announced it was no longer present.

The earliest Christian movement understood itself within that same historical framework, even as it developed new interpretations of Jesus and the events surrounding his death. Although the resurrection conviction led Jesus' followers to develop new theological language and to address questions that had not occupied the same central position within Jesus' primarily Galilean ministry, they consistently interpreted those developments through the continuing story of Israel. Their Scriptures remained Israel's Scriptures. Their understanding of God's faithfulness remained rooted in the covenant. Their hope remained fixed upon the completion of the reign they believed Jesus had proclaimed.

The Jerusalem movement is particularly important in this respect. Its continued Jewish character and the emphasis associated with James demonstrate that the earliest followers did not necessarily understand allegiance to Jesus as requiring the abandonment of covenantal patterns of communal life. Care for the poor, impartiality, integrity, mercy, humility, and faithful action remained central. The same two dimensions visible in Jesus' teaching—ultimate allegiance to God and responsibility toward neighbor—continued to structure the movement's understanding of faithful life. The Kingdom did not disappear with Jesus' death. Within the earliest movement's own understanding, it continued wherever the covenantal purposes associated with God's reign were embodied in community.

Paul develops the movement in a direction that both preserves and transforms its covenantal inheritance. His Gentile mission, rejection of circumcision as a requirement for membership, emphasis upon faith rather than works of the law, and developing theology of the new covenant significantly altered the social and theological structure of the movement. Most importantly, Paul increasingly placed the crucified and risen Christ at the center of proclamation, shifting the movement's organizing focus from the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus toward the meaning of Jesus himself. The connection with Israel's Scriptures and covenantal tradition remained, but the center of gravity had changed.

For Paul, the inclusion of Gentiles did not represent the cancellation of God's covenant but its expansion according to the promises already embedded within Israel's Scriptures. His letters repeatedly return to Abraham because Abraham stands at the beginning of the covenantal story. God's purpose, as Paul understood the inherited tradition, extended beyond one nation toward the blessing of all peoples. His interpretation therefore represents development within the covenantal story rather than a simple abandonment of it.

The same continuity appears, though in different forms, throughout the remainder of the New Testament. The Letter to the Hebrews presents Jesus as the mediator of a new covenant, but its argument depends upon the continuity of God's dealings with Israel. The new covenant is presented not simply as the rejection of the old but as the fulfillment of promises already contained within Israel's Scriptures. Similarly, the Book of Revelation culminates in imagery of universal divine rule and renewed creation that draws extensively upon Israel's prophetic traditions. These writings demonstrate that the earliest Christian communities did not merely repeat Jesus' words. They interpreted his life, death, and resurrection through inherited Jewish categories while adapting those categories to new historical circumstances.

None of these observations eliminates every historical difficulty. Scholars will continue to debate the dating of traditions, the interpretation of individual passages, the development of the Gospel

narratives, and the precise relationship between Jesus and the diverse forms of Judaism that surrounded him. Nor does this study claim to resolve the theological questions that have occupied Christian reflection for centuries. Those discussions properly continue.

The argument advanced here is more modest, but also more focused.

It proposes that the Kingdom of God is best understood historically as the realization of the covenantal conception of divine reign that Jesus inherited from Israel's Scriptures and Jewish tradition. Covenant provides the framework through which divine sovereignty is represented and understood, while Kingdom describes that sovereignty becoming historically effective and visible within human life. The two concepts should therefore not be treated as unrelated theological ideas that merely happen to intersect in Jesus' teaching. They are better understood as two perspectives on the same larger historical problem: how a people that understood God as its ultimate sovereign could embody that sovereignty within actual human society.

This interpretation also clarifies why the Kingdom should not be reduced to any single category. It is not simply a *timetable* for the end of history, although Jesus' proclamation retains an eschatological dimension. It is not merely an inward *spiritual* experience, although it concerns the transformation of persons. It is not simply a *political* program, although its claim that God is the ultimate sovereign necessarily relativizes human political authority. And it is not simply an *ethical* system, although justice, mercy, reconciliation, and responsibility toward one's neighbor are indispensable to its expression. The Kingdom is the broader historical realization of divine rule, and these dimensions represent different aspects of what such a realization would mean.

Whether this proposal ultimately proves persuasive depends upon its explanatory power. Historical arguments are rarely established by a single decisive piece of evidence. They are judged by how well they account for the available data while minimizing unnecessary assumptions. The question, therefore, is not whether every passage can be interpreted in only one way, but whether this model provides a more coherent explanation of the evidence than the principal alternatives. Its strength must ultimately be measured by its ability to connect the ancient world, Israelite covenant traditions, prophetic criticism, Second Temple Judaism, Jesus' proclamation, and the earliest Christian movement without requiring each stage to be treated as an isolated phenomenon.

If the answer is yes, then the implications of this reconstruction extend beyond the interpretation of a single doctrine. The Kingdom of God ceases to appear as an isolated theme within the teaching of Jesus and instead emerges as the culmination of a much longer historical conversation about sovereignty, covenant, justice, catastrophe, restoration, and human responsibility. What initially appears to be a collection of separate theological ideas can instead be understood as a developing historical tradition in which the question of God's rule repeatedly confronted the realities of human society.

The historical argument has therefore brought us to its central conclusion: the Kingdom of God emerged from Israel's covenantal conception of divine sovereignty, and Jesus proclaimed that reign as becoming visible within history. Its defining pattern joins two dimensions that cannot finally be separated: ultimate allegiance to God and responsibility toward one's neighbor. The Kingdom is therefore neither simply a promise about the future nor merely an inward spiritual reality. It is a conception of divine rule that becomes historically meaningful when its principles are embodied in human relationships and communal life.

The purpose of this study has not been to close the discussion but to reopen it from a different starting point. Rather than asking first whether the Kingdom is present or future, spiritual or political, ethical or apocalyptic, it has asked how God's reign is understood throughout the traditions Jesus inherited and whether that understanding provides a key to his proclamation. The proposal advanced here is that the Kingdom makes the most historical sense when understood as the realization of a covenantal conception of divine rule: a sovereignty that demands ultimate allegiance to God while expressing that allegiance through justice, mercy, responsibility, and faithful treatment of one's neighbor.

The Kingdom therefore becomes not a blueprint for civilization, but a standard through which the organization of human life can be examined. That is the question with which Part Two begins. If the Kingdom is understood as a way of life ordered under God's reign, what does its moral logic reveal about the civilizations human beings build? The purpose is not to reproduce ancient Israel or turn the Kingdom into a modern political program, but to examine what its principles might mean when brought into conversation with the world we have inherited and built—with questions of human dignity, freedom, justice, authority, wealth, community, and the exercise of power.



Part II

The Kingdom as a Civilizational Vision

Introduction

Part Two takes the moral logic established in Part One and asks what it reveals about civilization itself. Human dignity grounds freedom; freedom carries responsibility; justice concerns right relationship; authority remains accountable; wealth and power become stewardship; and human capability must remain directed toward human flourishing. The aim is not a political blueprint, but a standard by which the world we build can be judged.

From Divine Judgment to Human Consequence

That inquiry begins with an important distinction. The biblical traditions examined in Part One repeatedly interpreted political catastrophe, social disorder, and national defeat through the action of God. Israel's suffering could be understood as judgment for covenantal violation, just as prosperity and restoration could be understood as signs of divine favor. Historical inquiry, however, cannot establish that a deity caused any particular event. The theological interpretation belongs to the historical communities that preserved it; the events themselves must be examined through the causes that can be historically investigated.

This distinction does not make the ancient insight meaningless. It changes what can be learned from it. Human societies generate consequences through the relationships they create. When a people treats its own members unjustly, when rulers exploit those they govern, or when nations

pursue domination at the expense of their neighbors, the resulting instability does not require supernatural intervention to become real. Resentment, resistance, retaliation, distrust, violence, institutional decay, and conflict can emerge from the relationships themselves. What ancient communities could describe as divine judgment can therefore also be examined historically as a form of human cause and effect.

The question for the modern world is consequently not whether God intervenes to punish societies that violate moral principles. History cannot establish such a mechanism. The more accessible and more urgent question is whether societies that organize human relationships around dignity, responsibility, justice, reciprocity, and concern for the neighbor produce different consequences from societies organized around domination, exploitation, exclusion, and indifference.

The covenantal tradition can therefore be carried forward without requiring its ancient cosmology to be carried with it. The historical claim that God judges nations cannot be demonstrated empirically; the observable reality that human relationships produce consequences can. What remains valuable, therefore, is not a supernatural theory of political causation but the moral insight embedded within the tradition: **the way human beings treat one another helps determine the kind of world they create.**



Freedom, Human Dignity, and the Foundations of Civilization

Every political and economic order rests on an understanding of the human person. That answer determines how freedom, authority, justice, wealth, and rights are understood. The covenantal tradition begins with a decisive claim: human beings are created in the image of God and therefore possess dignity prior to every political institution. Age, wealth, ability, citizenship, education, or social position may shape circumstances, but none creates or removes fundamental human worth. Institutions exist for persons, not persons for institutions.

This changes the meaning of freedom. Modern liberal thought has rightly protected freedom from arbitrary interference, but freedom cannot be defined only as the absence of restraint. Israel's liberation from Egypt was not liberation from every obligation; it was liberation into covenantal life. Jesus continues that logic by joining love of God with love of neighbor. The first places ultimate allegiance beyond every earthly authority. The second gives freedom a social purpose: choices must be exercised within relationships where the dignity and well-being of others matter.

Human beings are never entirely self-sufficient. We depend upon families, communities, institutions, economic systems, knowledge, infrastructure, and one another. Dependence can become exploitation, but it can also become solidarity. The question is not whether dependence exists, but whether the relationships it creates are just. Economic circumstances therefore shape the choices available to people without eliminating individual agency. A person's resources can expand or restrict real choices, yet not every economic difference is unjust. The proper measure remains human dignity, responsibility, and meaningful participation.

Economic value must also remain distinct from human value. Markets need prices and valuations to coordinate exchange, but no price can measure the worth of a human being. The sick, elderly, disabled, unemployed, and economically unsuccessful do not possess less dignity; nor does wealth make a person more valuable. Prosperity is not a moral failure, and poverty is not automatically proof of injustice. What matters is how resources are acquired, used, and distributed, and whether the relationships surrounding them permit people to participate in communal life. In this sense, economic systems must remain subordinate to human dignity: people are the purpose of economic life, not merely the means through which profit is generated.

The same principle clarifies equality. Equality does not require identical abilities, circumstances, contributions, or outcomes. It requires equal human worth and moral consideration. This avoids two opposing reductions of the person: individualism can treat freedom as private preference detached from others, while collectivism can subordinate the individual to goals defined by the group or state. The covenant begins elsewhere. The person possesses inherent dignity and exists within relationships of responsibility.

Civilization should therefore be judged by more than wealth, technological sophistication, or formal liberty. Its deeper measure is the kind of people its institutions form and the relationships those institutions create. The covenantal foundation is simple: *dignity precedes political authority, freedom carries responsibility*, and human beings remain *persons before they become economic or political functions*.



Covenant, Neighbor, and the Meaning of Justice

Human beings live through relationships, and relationships create obligations. The covenant joins those obligations to love of God and love of neighbor. Devotion to God establishes the moral horizon; love of neighbor makes that allegiance visible. The covenant therefore judges not only individual conduct but the institutions through which people encounter one another. Families, economies, legal systems, and governments can strengthen reciprocity and responsibility or produce exclusion, exploitation, and domination.

Justice is consequently more than correct legal procedure. It concerns right relationships—whether people are treated with dignity, fairness, honesty, and faithfulness. The prophets made this inseparable from worship: religious observance could not excuse exploitation, corruption, or neglect of the vulnerable. Law remains essential, but law alone cannot manufacture justice, trust, generosity, or compassion.

The covenant does not require equal wealth or identical outcomes. Differences in ability, resources, and social position are unavoidable. The moral question is whether those differences remain subject to responsibility. Greater power means greater capacity to affect others and therefore greater obligation. The widow, orphan, stranger, debtor, laborer, and poor repeatedly appear in biblical tradition because vulnerability exposes where ordinary relationships can become radically unequal. Jesus extends this principle through hospitality, generosity, forgiveness, reconciliation, and concern for people who cannot repay in conventional terms.

Love of neighbor therefore requires more than avoiding harm. It demands relationships marked by honesty, mercy, generosity, fairness, and responsibility. Yet responsibility cannot become unlimited intervention. Human dignity includes agency. A just society must avoid both

abandonment and control, preserving space for people to act while ensuring that vulnerability does not become exclusion.

This balance defines the common good. It is neither the sacrifice of individuals for a collective calculation nor the protection of private preference without regard for others. It is the set of conditions in which persons and communities can flourish together with dignity, freedom, and responsibility. Progress must therefore be measured not only by growth, rights, or efficiency, but also by whether trust, solidarity, opportunity, and meaningful participation are strengthening.

These principles do not fit neatly within any single ideology. Liberal traditions rightly defend rights and limits on arbitrary power; collectivist traditions rightly emphasize solidarity and social responsibility. The Kingdom treats neither freedom nor obligation as absolute. Political authority is necessary, but it remains accountable to the same moral order. The question is not whether government is large or small, but whether its power remains directed toward human dignity and the common good.



Government, Stewardship, and the Common Good

If the covenant establishes responsibilities between human beings, the question of political authority follows naturally. Human beings are capable of cooperation and generosity, but also of violence, deception, exploitation, and the abuse of power. No society can depend entirely upon voluntary virtue. Communities require institutions to maintain order, protect rights, resolve disputes, defend the vulnerable, and restrain those who would use power against others. Yet political authority creates its own danger because those entrusted with power can become sources of injustice. The question is therefore not whether government is necessary, but what government is for and where its authority ends.

The covenantal tradition begins with the conviction that God alone possesses ultimate sovereignty. Human rulers may exercise legitimate authority, but they never become sovereign in an absolute sense. Kings, judges, and administrators remain subject to a moral order that precedes them and stands above them. Government may administer justice, establish laws, and protect the community, but it does not create human dignity or acquire unlimited authority simply because it possesses the power to enforce its decisions.

Israel's treatment of kingship illustrates this principle. The king remains accountable to covenantal obligations, and the prophets repeatedly demonstrate that political power itself can be judged. Their criticism does not reject government; it establishes the principle that government remains legitimate only when its exercise of power is accountable to a moral order beyond the interests of those who govern.

The same principle applies to modern government. Public authority performs functions individuals and voluntary associations cannot reliably perform alone: maintaining order,

administering justice, protecting rights, providing infrastructure, regulating relationships in which unequal power can produce abuse, and defending communities against violence. These responsibilities are not opposed to freedom. A functioning legal and political order is one of the conditions that makes freedom possible. The covenantal question is therefore not whether government should act, but whether its actions remain directed toward human dignity and the conditions necessary for a flourishing society.

Yet government cannot create the moral character upon which a free society depends. Laws can prohibit violence, exploitation, and dishonesty, but they cannot manufacture trust, generosity, compassion, fidelity, or love of neighbor. Those qualities develop through families, communities, schools, religious traditions, voluntary associations, and the relationships through which people learn to live with one another. Government cannot replace these institutions, but neither can it abandon responsibilities that only public authority can adequately fulfill. The covenant therefore rejects both an all-powerful state and the assumption that private action alone can preserve justice.

This same principle applies to economic life. Wealth is neither an absolutely private possession nor simply a resource for government to redistribute according to political priorities. The covenant understands wealth as stewardship. Property, labor, enterprise, and innovation can generate genuine prosperity, but ownership also creates the capacity to affect other people's lives and therefore carries responsibility. Markets can encourage innovation, coordinate resources, and create opportunity, but they operate within relationships and institutions that can either strengthen or weaken human flourishing. The question is not whether markets are inherently good or bad, but whether the relationships they produce respect dignity, preserve meaningful opportunity, and allow people and communities to flourish together.

Economic growth is therefore a genuine good, but it is not a sufficient measure of social health. An economy can grow while trust declines, communities weaken, or dependency increases. Growth must ultimately be evaluated by what it does to the human relationships and institutions within which economic life takes place.

This is the meaning of the common good. It is neither the sum of individual preferences nor whatever a government declares beneficial to society. It concerns the conditions under which persons and communities can live with dignity, exercise meaningful freedom, accept responsibility, and participate in relationships that sustain social life. Economic prosperity contributes to those conditions, as do education, health, security, trustworthy institutions, and meaningful participation. None is sufficient by itself.

The common good therefore cannot be produced by government alone. Families create belonging, communities sustain relationships, religious traditions cultivate moral commitments, schools transmit knowledge and habits, businesses create productive relationships, and voluntary associations bring people together around shared purposes. Government's role is to protect the space in which these institutions can flourish rather than attempting to replace them.

This requires political humility. No constitution, political party, economic system, or administrative structure perfectly embodies the Kingdom. Every institution is vulnerable to error, corruption, and unintended consequences. Political arrangements should therefore be judged by the principles they serve and the effects they have upon human beings, not treated as sacred because they belong to one ideological tradition or another. If no earthly government possesses absolute sovereignty, political disagreement need not become a struggle between competing

claims to ultimate authority. Institutions must remain capable of disagreement, experimentation, reform, and self-correction.

The covenantal understanding of government therefore creates a relationship between authority and stewardship. Political power is entrusted rather than absolute. Economic resources are possessed rather than morally unbounded. Government and markets alike remain accountable to a larger conception of human flourishing. The common good emerges not when one institution dominates the others, but when political authority, economic activity, and civil society remain ordered toward the dignity and flourishing of persons.

Yet institutions alone cannot sustain a civilization. They can establish laws, distribute resources, preserve order, and create opportunities, but they cannot produce the people capable of sustaining those institutions. A covenantal society therefore requires not only legitimate authority and responsible stewardship, but the formation of character, knowledge, compassion, and practical ability across generations. That is the question to which the next chapter turns.



Forming a Covenantal Society

Institutions can preserve order, but they cannot by themselves create a healthy civilization. Every generation must learn how to use freedom responsibly, cooperate beyond immediate interests, and develop the trust, honesty, compassion, and self-restraint on which social life depends. The covenant illustrates this formative dimension: a people is sustained not only by rules but by stories, practices, memories, relationships, and shared commitments transmitted across generations.

Education therefore has a broader purpose than information or employment. Technical competence matters, but civilization also requires judgment, courage, humility, discipline, the ability to evaluate evidence, and recognition of human dignity. Education should not eliminate disagreement; it should form people capable of reasoning, listening, and accepting responsibility.

The institutions between individual and state are equally important. Families, neighborhoods, religious communities, schools, voluntary associations, and professional organizations allow responsibility to be exercised at a human scale. Government can protect these institutions, but it cannot legislate the trust between neighbors or manufacture compassion by decree. A healthy society distributes responsibility rather than concentrating it entirely in the state.

Vulnerability is a decisive test. Illness, disability, aging, unemployment, and poverty are permanent possibilities of human life. A covenantal society refuses to measure worth by strength, income, health, or productivity. Jesus' treatment of people at the margins demonstrates this principle: those whose social position had weakened remained fully human and fully worthy of participation. Poverty therefore involves more than income; it can also mean exclusion from education, work, relationships, and meaningful contribution.

Healthcare makes this principle concrete. Illness, disability, aging, and suffering can reduce a person's ability to participate, but they do not reduce the person's dignity. A humane society therefore judges care not only by medical efficiency or who pays for it, but by whether the vulnerable remain visible, supported, and included. Compassion cannot belong solely to markets or to the state; families, communities, voluntary associations, and public institutions each have a role in sustaining it.

Community provides something neither markets nor government can fully supply: belonging. People need relationships in which they are known as persons rather than classified by economic or institutional function. Families and communities can themselves become unhealthy and exclusionary, so they must not be romanticized. But their absence can leave people isolated despite extensive formal freedom.

Civilization consequently requires both structure and character. Good institutions protect dignity and restrain arbitrary power, while good character allows institutions to function without constant coercion. Neither can permanently compensate for the absence of the other. People learn responsibility by being entrusted with responsibility; generosity by practicing generosity; and cooperation by belonging to communities in which cooperation matters.



Stewardship, Technology, and the Future of Civilization

If human beings possess dignity and live within relationships of responsibility, then the resources they control cannot be morally neutral. Land, labor, property, capital, knowledge, and technology all create power. The covenant approaches possession through stewardship: ownership is real, but it is not absolute. What is possessed remains connected to obligations toward the neighbor and community.

The principle becomes more urgent as human capability expands. Modern civilization commands financial capital that crosses borders instantly, digital systems that influence billions, artificial intelligence that can transform work and decision-making, and biotechnology capable of altering the conditions of life. The technologies change; the moral principle does not: greater power creates greater responsibility.

Wealth can provide security, opportunity, independence, and resources for others, but it can also create influence far beyond the person who possesses it. Economic value must therefore remain distinct from human value. The poor do not belong less because they possess less, and the wealthy do not become more valuable because they possess more. Redistribution may sometimes be necessary, but the deeper question is how resources are produced, possessed, and used, and whether those relationships strengthen participation rather than dependency or exclusion.

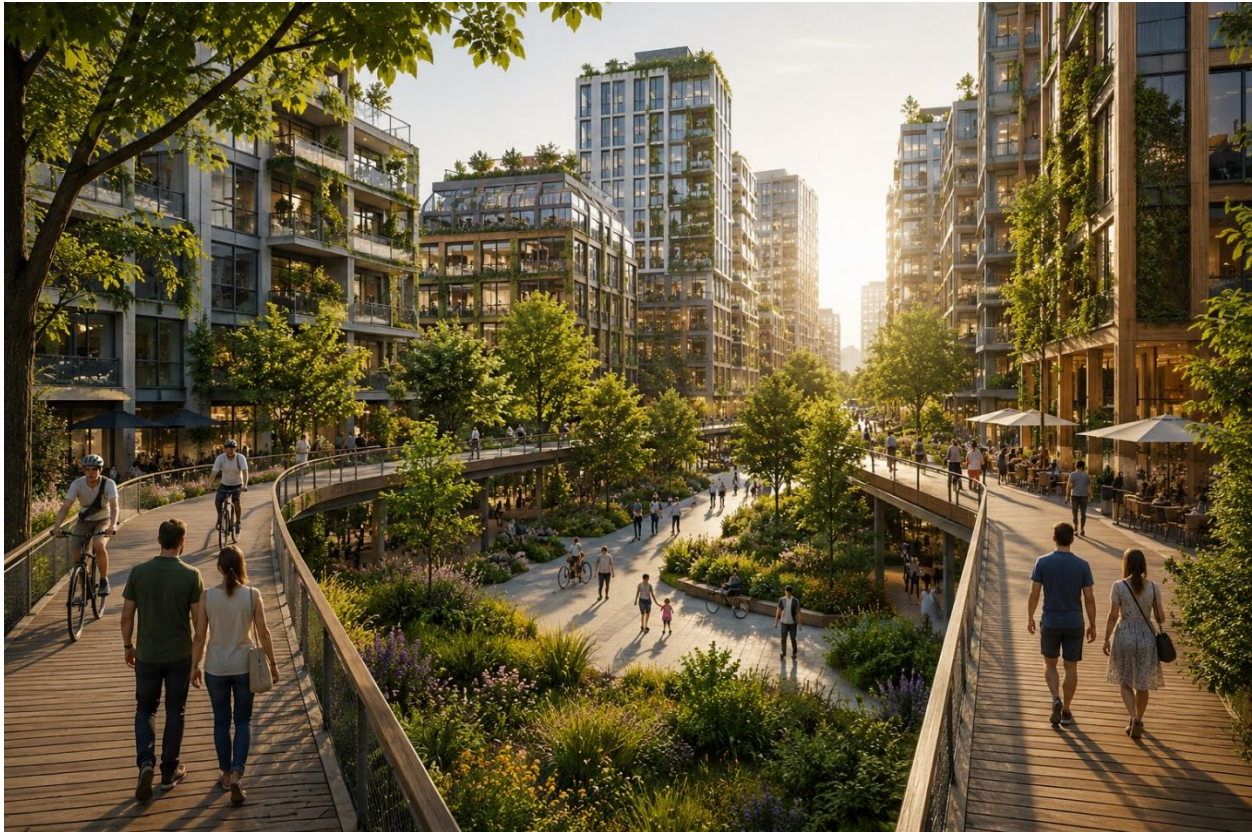
Economic freedom remains important. People should generally be free to work, create, trade, save, invest, own property, and pursue legitimate enterprise. But freedom exists within moral relationships. Markets also depend upon law, infrastructure, education, trust, and limits on overwhelming concentrations of power. Without those conditions, economic freedom can become freedom primarily for the strongest.

Technology extends the same problem. Artificial intelligence can amplify human capability while concentrating influence over labor, information, and decision-making. Scientific advances can improve life while creating questions existing institutions may not be prepared to answer.

The Kingdom supplies no technical blueprint, but it supplies a standard: Does technology strengthen human agency? Expand meaningful opportunity? Concentrate power without accountability? Improve human well-being rather than merely increase capacity?

The same stewardship extends to creation itself. Genesis presents the world not as humanity's absolute possession but as something entrusted to human care. Dominion therefore means neither unrestricted exploitation nor passive preservation. Land, water, animals, and natural resources must be used in ways that respect both present communities and those who come after them. A civilization that increases its power by destroying the conditions of its own flourishing has confused capability with wisdom.

The principle can be stated simply: possession creates responsibility; power creates responsibility; knowledge creates responsibility; technology creates responsibility. The greater the capacity to affect other human beings, the greater the obligation to consider how that capacity is used. Progress is therefore not measured only by what civilization can produce, but by whether growing capability is accompanied by growing wisdom.



Kingdom Civilization

Every civilization rests on assumptions about what human beings are, what they owe one another, and what society exists to accomplish. The argument developed throughout Part Two has followed the covenantal vision from the person outward: dignity establishes value; freedom becomes meaningful through responsibility; love of neighbor becomes social obligation; justice judges relationships and institutions; government remains accountable; wealth becomes stewardship; education and community form the people capable of sustaining freedom; care for the vulnerable protects dignity; and technology and creation become fields of responsible stewardship.

At the center stands the Kingdom's vertical and horizontal dimensions. Vertically, ultimate allegiance belongs to God rather than to any king, government, ideology, or economic system. Because no earthly institution is ultimate, every institution can be judged. This places a permanent limit on political power and protects freedom of conscience. Horizontally, love of neighbor gives covenant its social expression through justice, mercy, generosity, responsibility, and care for the vulnerable. The two dimensions are inseparable: allegiance to God without love of neighbor becomes empty formalism; concern for the neighbor without any authority beyond human power leaves justice vulnerable to whoever controls society.

The Kingdom therefore cannot be identified with a modern ideology. Liberal traditions have defended liberty, conscience, and rights; collectivist traditions have emphasized solidarity and social responsibility. Each contains genuine insight, but neither is complete. The Kingdom asks a deeper question of every system: Does it protect human dignity? Restrain abusive authority? Preserve freedom while encouraging responsibility? Create opportunity without turning

economic value into human value? Protect the vulnerable? Hold greater power to greater responsibility?

This is a moral horizon rather than a political blueprint. Societies differ in history, culture, geography, and circumstance; institutions can therefore vary while serving the same underlying principles. The measure of progress is not capability alone but what capability does to human beings and their relationships. A civilization may become wealthier, more technologically advanced, and more efficient while weakening trust, belonging, or meaningful participation. Progress becomes genuine when greater capability is accompanied by greater wisdom and responsibility.

The Kingdom's historical foundations remain Jewish. Jesus proclaimed God's reign from within Israel's covenantal tradition, and that history must neither be erased nor bypassed. At the same time, the discussion that follows uses “God” in the broadest sense of the transcendent moral authority represented by this tradition, without requiring the reader to adopt a particular denominational conception of God. Its moral implications need not therefore be confined by ethnicity. The expansion of the movement beyond Israel demonstrated that its principles could be carried into new communities without requiring the ancient covenantal structure to be reproduced or discarded. Nor does the Kingdom require modern governments to become formally Christian. It becomes visible wherever people and institutions order their lives toward the moral purposes associated with God's reign.

The Kingdom remains both present and unfinished. It can become visible through relationships, communities, institutions, justice, mercy, generosity, and responsibility, while no human society can embody it completely. Its power lies precisely in its ability to judge every human system—including systems created in its name. No government, church, party, nation, or market can identify itself fully with God's reign without turning a moral horizon into an instrument of power.

The conclusion is therefore straightforward. The Kingdom does not offer a ready-made civilization waiting to be reconstructed from the ancient world. It offers a way of judging civilization. It begins with the dignity of the person, places earthly authority under a higher moral claim, joins freedom to responsibility, understands justice as right relationship, treats wealth and power as stewardship, recognizes the vulnerable as full members of the community, and measures progress by the relationship between growing capability and growing wisdom.

The result is neither a rejection of modern civilization nor an uncritical celebration of it. It is a framework for asking what civilization is becoming. The principles examined here are now in view. The next question is no longer theoretical: How well is the world we have actually built measuring up?



Conclusion

The Kingdom Is Not Elsewhere

A study of the Kingdom of God eventually reaches a point at which historical reconstruction alone is no longer sufficient. The historian can ask where the language came from, how it developed, what traditions shaped it, how Jesus may have understood it, and how later communities transformed it. Those questions remain essential. But once the historical argument has been followed to its conclusion, another question becomes unavoidable: **what if the Kingdom was never primarily about leaving this world?**

The argument of this study has led in another direction. The Kingdom emerges from a tradition in which divine sovereignty is not merely a statement about the existence of God, but a claim about the ordering of human life. The covenant asks what it means for a people to live under divine authority. The prophets ask what happens when that order is violated. Love of neighbor gives allegiance to God a social form. Justice becomes a measure of the community. Political authority remains accountable. Wealth becomes stewardship. The vulnerable become a test of the moral character of society. And the Kingdom gathers these themes into the proclamation that the reign of God has drawn near. Seen in this light, the Kingdom is not principally a destination somewhere beyond history. It is a claim about history itself.

This does not require denying every theological belief concerning resurrection, judgment, or life beyond death. Those questions belong to the wider religious traditions that developed around the Kingdom proclamation, and they cannot be settled by historical reconstruction alone. The narrower point is more fundamental: the Kingdom cannot be reduced to an afterlife destination without losing much of the social and historical meaning of the tradition from which it emerged. The Kingdom concerns what happens when God's sovereignty becomes consequential within human existence.

That is why the language of Jesus is so striking. He does not announce merely that human beings will one day be removed from the world. He announces that God's reign has drawn near. The distinction matters because a promise of escape asks where human beings will eventually go, while a proclamation of divine reign asks how human beings are to live now. The difference is enormous.

If the Kingdom is primarily somewhere else, then the suffering of this world can become something to endure while waiting for another. Poverty can be spiritualized, injustice can be postponed, and domination can be tolerated because history is temporary. Human beings can be taught to endure the world rather than transform the relationships that make the world what it is. But if the Kingdom means the realization of God's sovereignty within human life, then the moral condition of this world cannot be treated as irrelevant. The neighbor matters now, the vulnerable matter now, justice matters now, and the way human beings exercise authority over one another matters now. The treatment of the stranger matters now, as do the uses of wealth, land, knowledge, and technological power. **The Kingdom is therefore not an escape from responsibility but the intensification of responsibility.**

This may also explain why the covenantal tradition is so important to the historical reconstruction. Covenant does not describe a people waiting to abandon earthly existence. It describes a people attempting, however imperfectly, to order earthly existence under a sovereignty greater than the ruler, the tribe, the economy, or the state. The prophets repeatedly return to the same question: *does the society actually live according to the order it claims to serve?* That question survives the ancient world. It survives the monarchy, the Temple, exile, the Roman period, and Christianity. Indeed, it may be one of the most demanding questions the tradition has ever asked: does the world we build resemble the order we claim to believe in?

The question becomes especially difficult because every community is tempted to answer it by judging someone else. A people can proclaim its own righteousness while ignoring the suffering it causes. A government can invoke security while exceeding the moral limits of power. A church can proclaim love while using fear or exclusion to preserve its authority. An economic system can celebrate prosperity while allowing human beings to become instruments of production. An ideology can speak of justice while denying the dignity of those who disagree with it. The covenantal tradition offers no exemption for any of them.

Indeed, one of its most remarkable features is precisely the opposite. Israel's election does not make Israel immune from judgment. The king is not immune. Jerusalem is not immune. The Temple is not immune. Religious observance is not immune. Sacred identity is not immune. The closer the claimed relationship to God, the greater the responsibility attached to it. This principle deserves to be carried into the modern world without qualification.

No people, government, institution, or civilization can claim moral immunity by appealing to sacred identity, historical suffering, divine election, political necessity, or the righteousness of its

cause. The Kingdom cannot be measured by the righteousness a people claims for itself; it must be measured by the way that people exercises power over others.

This is where the prophetic tradition becomes unexpectedly contemporary. The prophets did not ask only whether Israel possessed the correct religious identity. They asked what happened to the poor. They asked whether judges could be corrupted, whether merchants exploited the weak, whether rulers used authority for themselves, and whether religious institutions had become substitutes for justice. Their questions were directed inward before they were directed outward. That is an important discipline for anyone who wishes to invoke the Kingdom today because it means that the Kingdom cannot become a weapon with which one condemns one's enemies while exempting one's own community. The standard must travel in every direction.

It must judge the powerful and the powerless, governments and movements, majorities and minorities, victors and defeated, religious institutions and secular institutions. It must judge one's allies as readily as one's enemies, and it must begin with the human being standing before us. This is why the present world cannot be discussed without eventually confronting its most painful realities.

The suffering of civilians caught in war, the fear and historical trauma carried by communities, the destruction of homes and institutions, the killing and displacement of populations, the grief produced by violence, and the political decisions that can perpetuate cycles of retaliation all place the same question before us: what does the Kingdom require of human beings when they possess power over one another? The answer cannot be that one group's humanity cancels another's, nor can historical suffering become a permanent moral exemption or political necessity become a principle by which every action is justified.

Historical inquiry cannot establish that any present catastrophe is simply "God's punishment." To make such a claim would repeat precisely the methodological error this study has tried to avoid. The biblical writers interpreted catastrophe through divine judgment because that was the theological framework through which they understood history. We can study that framework historically, but we cannot turn it into an empirical formula that allows us to declare which modern suffering God has caused. There is, however, another lesson available to us: **human beings create consequences through the relationships they establish.**

When fear becomes permanent, it shapes institutions. When humiliation becomes inherited, it shapes generations. When violence becomes reciprocal, each side can understand its own violence as necessary response. When political power becomes unaccountable, those without power bear the consequences. When the humanity of the other is diminished, cruelty becomes easier to justify. These consequences do not require supernatural explanation to become real. This is the modern form of the ancient prophetic insight.

The question is therefore not which people God has chosen to punish. The question is what kind of world human beings are creating through the choices they make. That question belongs everywhere: wherever governments imprison without justice, wherever wealth becomes domination, wherever minorities become disposable, wherever migrants are treated as less than human, wherever technological capability outruns moral responsibility, wherever economic success is purchased through the exclusion of others, wherever religious identity becomes an excuse for cruelty, and wherever political loyalty becomes more important than truth. The Kingdom judges all of it.

And because it judges all of it, it must also judge the civilization that has emerged from the modern world. Modern civilization has achieved capacities that earlier societies could scarcely imagine. Human beings can communicate across continents instantly, manipulate genetic material, produce extraordinary quantities of food, cure diseases that once seemed inevitable, place machines beyond the atmosphere, and develop artificial intelligence capable of transforming how knowledge itself is produced and used. Yet capability is not wisdom, power is not goodness, efficiency is not justice, and growth is not flourishing.

Freedom without responsibility can become indifference. Authority without accountability can become domination. Wealth without stewardship can become exclusion. Technology without wisdom can amplify the very weaknesses it was meant to overcome. This is why the Kingdom remains unfinished. It is not a civilization waiting somewhere beyond the horizon for humanity to enter it, nor is it a political system that can be installed by decree. It is a standard against which every civilization remains answerable.

The Kingdom begins wherever human beings refuse to treat another person as disposable, becomes visible wherever power is restrained by responsibility, and takes practical form wherever freedom is exercised with regard for the freedom and dignity of others. It becomes visible wherever justice is more important than vengeance, wherever wealth is treated as stewardship rather than entitlement to unlimited power, wherever the stranger is recognized as a neighbor, and wherever institutions exist for human beings rather than human beings for institutions. It also becomes visible wherever growing human capability is accompanied by growing wisdom.

None of this means that human beings can create a perfect Kingdom through political effort. History gives little reason for such confidence. Every attempt to create heaven by concentrating power in human hands risks becoming another form of domination. The moment an institution declares itself to be the complete embodiment of the Kingdom, it places itself beyond judgment and thereby contradicts the very principle that the Kingdom represents.

No government is the Kingdom, no church is the Kingdom, no nation is the Kingdom, no economic system is the Kingdom, and no ideology is the Kingdom. Each may embody something of its moral logic, and each may also betray it. That is why the Kingdom must remain above every institution that claims to serve it.

The ancient covenantal insight was that even Israel could be judged by the standard it claimed to receive from God. The modern implication is that no human arrangement can escape the same test. Perhaps this is the most important conclusion to emerge from the entire study: **the Kingdom is not a place to which humanity escapes after failing to make this world just. It is the horizon against which humanity is asked to judge what it is doing with this world.**

The question is not whether we can construct heaven. The question is whether we are willing to make our institutions, relationships, economies, technologies, and political decisions answerable to something higher than our immediate interests. The Kingdom therefore begins not with the conquest of another people, the triumph of one ideology, or the perfection of one institution, but with the recognition that the person standing before us possesses a claim upon our conduct. That is the meaning of the neighbor.

And perhaps that is where the entire argument finally comes together. The story began with divine sovereignty. It passed through creation and covenant, liberation and law, kingship and

prophecy, catastrophe and restoration. It arrived at Jesus proclaiming that the Kingdom of God had drawn near. When that proclamation is placed back within the history from which it emerged, the Kingdom looks less like an invitation to abandon the world than a demand to reconsider what the world might become.

The ancient question was whether human beings could live under the sovereignty of God. The modern question is what such sovereignty would require of a civilization possessing unprecedented power. We already know what we are capable of doing. The question is whether we are capable of becoming wise enough to use that power well.

The Kingdom offers no guarantee that we will. Instead, it offers a standard by which we can know when we have failed, a vision by which we can recognize what flourishing might look like, and a responsibility that cannot finally be transferred to someone else. The Kingdom is not elsewhere. It is the work of bringing the moral reality we claim to believe in into the relationships through which we actually live, and that work remains unfinished.

The historical movement traced in this study, however, does not end with the Kingdom remaining enclosed within the particular community from which its language emerged. The biblical story begins with humanity, moves toward Abraham, develops through Israel and its covenant, and eventually articulates a vision of divine sovereignty whose horizon extends beyond the boundaries of one people. Jesus stands within that history rather than outside it. His proclamation of the Kingdom does not erase Israel's particular story; it carries its moral logic into a horizon in which the sovereignty of God cannot finally be restricted to one people.

The significance of that movement is not that particular identity must disappear. It is that particular identity and universal responsibility need not be opposites. A people can preserve its history, memory, culture, religious traditions, and legitimate concern for its own security without treating the humanity of neighboring peoples as secondary. Likewise, recognizing the dignity and historical claims of another people does not require the erasure of one's own identity. The Kingdom does not abolish particular belonging. It transforms the meaning of belonging by making responsibility toward the other inseparable from loyalty to one's own.

This principle becomes especially sobering when we recognize that the historical land we have been discussing remains a place where questions of belonging, security, historical memory, displacement, and competing claims continue to produce profound human suffering. The ancient question of how human beings should live with one another has therefore not disappeared with the ancient world. It remains visible in the struggles of communities that carry memories of persecution and displacement, in the fear produced by insecurity and violence, and in the difficulty of reconciling the legitimate desire for belonging and self-determination with the equal humanity of the people who live alongside one another. The Kingdom therefore provides a standard that moves in both directions: no community's security should require the permanent denial of another's dignity, freedom, or belonging, just as no community's liberation should require the denial of another's identity, history, or legitimate security.

The larger implication extends beyond the Middle East. The Kingdom asks whether human beings can understand belonging without turning belonging into exclusion, whether historical memory can become a source of moral responsibility rather than a justification for perpetual fear, and whether communities can recognize that the humanity of the neighbor does not diminish their own. The Kingdom's universal horizon does not require the negation of particular peoples

or cultures. It requires that no particular people claim moral exemption from the humanity of others.

That is perhaps the deepest continuity between the covenant and the Kingdom. Israel's election establishes belonging, but it also establishes accountability. The community that claims a special relationship with God is not thereby released from responsibility toward others; its claim increases the seriousness of that responsibility. When the Kingdom moves beyond Israel into the nations, this principle becomes universal rather than exclusive. What was first articulated within the life of one covenantal community becomes a standard by which human communities more broadly can be judged.

In that sense, the Kingdom described throughout this study is not a distant realm to which human beings escape from the world. Its language concerns the reign of God becoming consequential within human history and within the relationships through which human beings organize their lives. It begins in a particular history, but its moral horizon cannot remain confined to that history. It passes from covenant to Kingdom, from Israel to the nations, and ultimately toward a vision of human life in which the dignity of the other becomes inseparable from the flourishing of the self.

The Kingdom is not elsewhere. It is the work of bringing the moral reality we claim to believe in into the relationships through which we actually live, and that work remains unfinished.

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